

Monster Tamer

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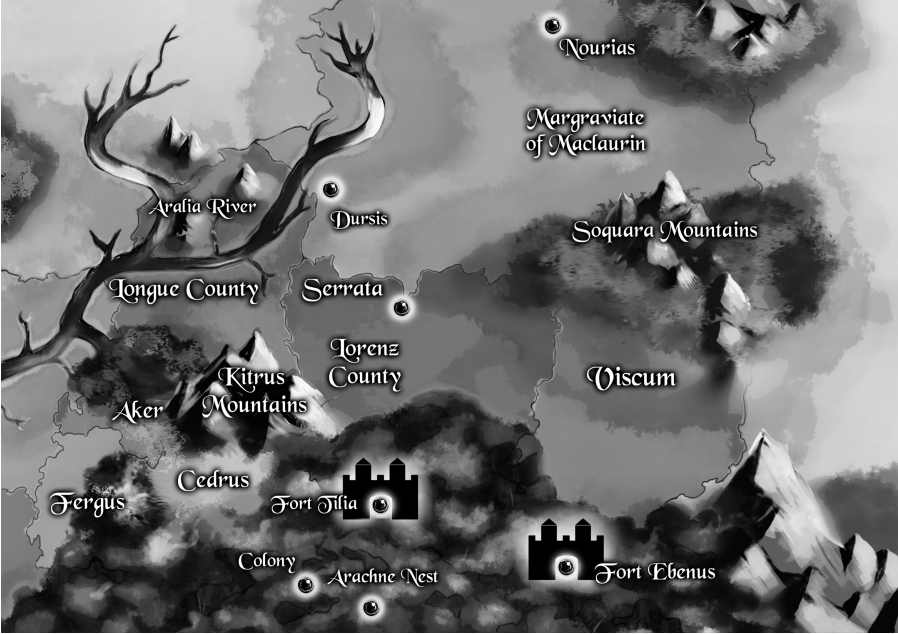


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Chapter 1: In a Cellar in the Imperial Capital

In this world, a great country called the Eryx Empire owned most of the habitable lands. However, the Empire was in no way the world's ruler. After all, another organization with far greater authority and military power existed.

Such was the Holy Church, an organization whose members revered the saviors from other worlds, and which was the religious foundation for every citizen of every nation. Its headquarters was a grand cathedral located in the Empire's capital city. Just a glance at its majestic exterior, more impressive than the castle housing the imperial family itself, made evident the vast power the Holy Church possessed.

Today, just like any other day, believers from all over the world gathered within its walls. They looked around at the various articles related to saviors, let their imaginations run wild with the legends they'd learned through hearsay, and bowed their heads in prayer for their personal safety and that of those close to them.

Naturally, parts of the building were off-limits. Important areas were dedicated to sacred rites, the clergy's living quarters, defensive facilities, and other such purposes. Knights of the Holy Order kept a constant watch so that those without authority were prevented from entering these areas.

There was also a section of the grand cathedral that even many of the knights were unaware existed. This room was one such area. Everything was made of polished stone, from the floor all the way up to the ceiling, and the air was cold and heavy. Even taking a breath felt like a weight in one's chest.

Far inside the room was an altar. Anyone capable of using magic would recognize it as a magic tool. Several gems that appeared to be runestones were embedded in it, and the aura of densely packed mana radiated from it.

Two men stood before the altar. A grave atmosphere hung over them as if they were a crystallization of the heavy air in the room. One was close to two meters tall with a thoroughly trained body and was wearing the splendid armor of a knight. This was Harrison Addington, the marshal of the Holy Order and its First Company's commander.

The other was an old man with white hair. In contrast to Harrison, his body was slender. He was tall and had a fair bit of muscle for his age, but that was a result of maintaining his personal health, rather than something for the sake of battle. He didn't appear weak when standing next to Harrison, though. There was something about the old man that made him seem like a large boulder, unmoved by long years exposed to the elements.

The imposing old man's name was Gerd Kruger. He was one of the archbishops who managed the Holy Church. Breaking the heavy silence, he opened his dry lips to speak.

"The world trembles."

He was hoarse, but his voice rang with a force only found in those who knew with certainty what their purpose was and pushed forward undauntingly to achieve it.

"Only with an unshakable foundation can our citizens survive. It is none other than the great saviors' existence that supports our world. Thus, the saviors must be prioritized, no matter the cost."

He paused, turning a severe gaze to Harrison.

"The church's complete historical records show no precedent of so many saviors appearing in our lands at once. Consequently, an unexpected situation may occur. No, not 'may.' There are already omens of it, and our duty is to bring an end to it."

"I understand, Lord Kruger," Harrison replied, nodding gravely. "We exist solely for the safety of the people and the stability of the world. To that end, we must be willing to offer our very lives."

Harrison was earnest, and the words he spoke echoed with the pureness of a martyr.

"Very good," Gerd said, pointing lightly with his chin. "Then go."

"Sir!"

At the archbishop's command, Harrison left the room. Only Gerd knew where the knight was going.

Chapter 2: The Wolf and the Shadow

~Berta's POV~

Some time had passed since I parted ways with Majima Takahiro during his journey to the dragon settlement. Just as I'd told him, I was planning on meeting my king, but this required a fair amount of time. My king moved about while hiding his presence from the world, so having been independent of him for some time, it wasn't easy to get in touch.

If I could transform into a human, I could contact Anton—one of my king's other subjects, a doppelqueen—through one of her spawns who'd slipped into a town to gather information. Still, no matter how hard I tried, my lower half remained that of a wolf, so I couldn't enter human settlements. Because of this, my king had prepared a means for me to get in touch with him—he'd left one of his subjects in a region no human could enter.

My king's ability allowed him to command monsters and freely manipulate them. With exceptions like Anton and I, all monsters under his control could only do what he ordered. When separated from him, they couldn't make decisions of their own accord. But that didn't mean he could only use them when they were nearby. Such creative use of power was a human specialty. My king fully grasped his ability, so he could simply give orders beforehand about what to do given a variety of conditions, making it possible to use monsters who were far away from him.

The monster who'd been left in a remote region had been ordered to let our king know if I showed up, though it was up to his discretion whether he would actually meet me. After waiting a few days, the monster returned. Fortunately, it was accompanied by another monster meant to act as a guide. And just like that, I returned to my king's side for the first time in a while.



I was guided to a place far away from Aker. In human terms, it was the territory of a minor noble in the southern Empire. I was a little curious about what my king was up to here.

“Berta.”

I followed the guide through a dense forest, when one of Anton's

spawns appeared in our path. It had the form of the boy who'd died at Fort Tilia, Juumonji Tatsuya. A fair number of monsters surrounded us, likely on watch for any enemies tailing the guide...or rather, me, in case I messed up. I could sense the presence of a large army of monsters loitering farther beyond. It looked like the expansion of my king's forces was going well. Relieved by that, I responded to her call.

"It has been a while, Anton."

Anton didn't respond to my greeting. Instead, she spoke in an exceedingly businesslike manner.

"I'll guide you to our king. Follow me."

She turned on her heel without even giving me a glance. I followed her, smiling bitterly to myself.

Anton was a monster with a will, much like me, but like our king's regular pawns, she had no emotions. No matter what she saw, no matter what she did, she didn't feel anything, so she faithfully obeyed our king's orders. Her way of life was ideal for one of our king's subjects. Honestly, I was envious, knowing that such emotions were exactly my problem.

At any rate, the emotionless Anton only ever did what was needed. I already knew that, but I had greeted her like a human. Perhaps I'd been influenced a little by *their* conduct. Maybe the same thoughts went through Anton's mind too.

"How was your time with the Second King?" she asked.

Anton only ever did what was necessary, so maybe she'd judged that this idle chatter was needed. But in that case, what was the intent behind it?

I had a bad premonition. I was a failure among my king's subjects; I was strong in battle, but I had far too many pointless flaws to offset that advantage. For example, my heart—in other words, my emotions, feelings, and sympathy. My king deemed all such things unnecessary, but no matter how I tried to freeze my heart, no matter how much I served my role, those unnecessary parts remained somewhere within me.

Since I was like this, my only use was to remain by the side of Majima Takahiro, with whom my king was greatly infatuated. My king had deemed that I would provoke the least animosity. Specifically, since Majima Takahiro's governing principles were completely different from his own, my king had determined that I would fit in better with them. He'd already considered the dangers of my being won over by the other group too. That decision had included the readiness to cut me loose, which Anton would understand.

Maybe she was probing me for the possibility. I didn't mind being cut loose, but only if I were dying for my king's sake. I didn't want to be purged for being a traitor.

“I’ll speak of everything I saw once I am before our king,” I answered.

“I see.” Fortunately, Anton backed down immediately, but she still moved on to another topic. “How is that big white spider doing?”

“What...?” I said, hesitating for a moment, wondering if this was also a necessity. “Pretty much the same as always. If I had to mention anything... Oh, she’s been worrying about how to advance her relationship with her king, now that they’ve become lovers. She seems to be enjoying each and every day.”

I didn’t need to go out of my way to inform our king of this information, so it was surely fine to mention it now.

“I see,” Anton said briefly, immediately going silent.

“Did something happen between you and the white spider?” I asked.

Now that I thought of it, Anton always seemed to have that white spider on her mind. I recalled the somewhat provocative words they’d exchanged the last time they’d met.

I didn’t really expect an answer, but Anton defied my expectations.

“Back when we first bumped into each other at Fort Tilia...” Anton started, but then she held her tongue. “We will soon be before our king.”

We’d arrived at our destination; it was a cave. We stopped our idle chatter and stepped inside. Anton’s spawn, still copying the figure of Juumonji Tatsuya, walked on, its footsteps echoing off the walls.

The cave was bright. A large flaming lizard crawled across the wall, likely there for both illumination and defense. As we got deeper inside, I saw the figures of the monsters our king had given names—the doppelqueen Anton, the nightmare stalker Dora, and the Mad Beast Emil.

Surrounded by these monsters, ones who were far stronger than the hundreds of other monsters he commanded, was the small figure of our king. He was sitting at a desk, one Anton or the like had probably acquired in town. Several stacks of paper sat atop it, and our king was looking over one of them.

Aah, I’m finally back. I was happy to see my king after so long, and barely managed to stop my tail from wagging. I knew he hated such displays of emotion.

“Oh, Berta. You’re back.”

He turned my way. Even though it’d been a while since we’d seen each other, his eyes showed little interest. He had no interest in anyone in this entire world, with one single exception. His servants were nothing but pawns, and everyone else he would one day kill. Nevertheless, the gaze he turned toward me was colder than even

that. I felt like my heart would break—an unnecessary feeling as my king's pawn.

"I've returned, my king."

I brought an end to my useless thoughts and walked before him. He raised his slender face. It looked like he'd gotten skinnier again. My king was thin to begin with. Even after having acquired a superpower in this world, he wasn't the type to train his body. But within that slender frame, one that was no different from the average human's, burned a black flame of hatred and despair. It felt like it could burn the entire world, and it constantly scorched him as well.

"Has Senpai gotten stronger?"

The only time he seemed to forget these self-destructive emotions was when he talked about anything related to Majima Takahiro. I liked seeing him like this, even if his eyes weren't really looking at me when we talked.

"Tell me everything, Berta."

"Yes."



It took a fair amount of time to relay everything that had happened from the beginning of my duty guarding Majima Takahiro to the point I'd parted with him.

"A hidden settlement of dragons, you say," my king said, showing particular interest in that last detail. "Now that's interesting. I'd like to know more."

"Forgive me. I parted ways with them before they visited the settlement itself."

"Is that so? Well, never mind then. I'd rather not displease Majima-senpai."

I thought he would try to concoct some scheme related to Draconia, but he backed down easily.

"Do make sure not to spoil that policy in the future," he added.

"Understood."

"Anyway...a clan of dragons. To make contact with such valuable beings, that's my senpai for you."

This was my king's first exchange in a while with the one and only person he saw as his equal, even if it was through a messenger. He smiled in great humor. It wasn't his usual emotionless smile either. It was as if he were any other normal boy. I hadn't been able to make the distinction before, but now I could see it clearly. Maybe another change was occurring in me after spending time with Majima Takahiro's group. If so...

"Hey, Berta. If you do come back here..."

The request he'd entrusted me with came back to mind, so I

boldly cut to the chase.

“My king. That is everything regarding my knowledge of Majima Takahiro’s activities. I have one more message to pass on. May I?”

“A message from Majima-senpai? What is it?” my king asked, full of interest.

“Up until now, I have only been dispatched as Majima Takahiro’s guard,” I started with no small amount of tension in my voice. “I have been nothing more than a loaned combatant. However, he has asked me to contact you about making it more than that.”

“He asked you to...?” he said, finding this unexpected.

“This is dangerous, my king,” cut in Dora, who’d been standing behind him. “Berta, do you intend on leaking information about our king to him?”

Her shadowy face twisted as she glared at me. Unlike her emotionless mother Anton, Dora served our king with absolute loyalty while displaying fits of anger like this. As far as possessing emotions, she was the same as me. Be that as it may, all of her emotions came from her loyalty, so much like Anton, she would never object to any of our king’s plans. As such, she was also a perfect subject.

Her anger was reasonable. In fact, I’d raised the same concerns with Majima Takahiro when he’d brought this up. My king had an abnormal number of enemies, and having unnecessary connections to others could lead directly to danger. In a sense, this was an outrageous request, but I wasn’t the one making the decision.

“Stand down, Dora,” our king said.

“B-But...”

“Majima-senpai has no ill intent. You’re overthinking things.”

Despite being surprised, our king showed no anger as Dora had. He actually looked pleased.

“Heh heh. I see. So it’s come to this,” he continued, his shoulders shaking. “Meaning, he still hasn’t given up on me, has he?”

“He hasn’t,” I answered hesitantly.

“Heh heh heh. Very well,” he said with another laugh. “Keeping in touch with him isn’t bad for me either, seeing as how I want to recruit him.”

“You mean...?”

“Yes, I’ll accept his offer,” my king answered, pulling a paper out of the pile on his desk. “But, in that case, it’s hardly fair that I’m getting all this information. Revealing my current location would be a little too much, though. Instead, how about you take him a little gift? Wait a moment.”

He shuffled through the pile of papers while running a pen across a blank sheet. After writing something down, he folded it and placed it inside a leather bag.

“Take this to him,” he ordered.

I stretched a tentacle out from my waist and accepted the leather bag.

“This is information that Anton has gathered on the movements of the other visitors,” he added.

“Information on visitors...”

To my king, who’d witnessed hell on the day the Colony fell, the large majority of visitors were targets of hatred. At the same time, many of them had powers that could rival his, so he was paying close attention to their activities. Perhaps that wasn’t all either...

“It should be about time for Senpai to leave that settlement. Please continue guarding him. If you have something to tell me, then return. I will send messengers every now and then too.”

With that, he returned his focus to his desk. Our talk was over. I lowered my head deeply, then parted ways with him once more.



After leaving the cave, I stretched. I’d gotten the result I’d been hoping for, allowing me to relax a little.

“Hm?”

Just then, I heard footsteps behind me and turned around.

“Anton?”

Anton’s spawn, the one assuming the form of Juumonji Tatsuya, came out behind me.

“I was under the impression you would plead to stay by our king’s side,” she said, emotionless as ever, once she got close.

“Did you follow me out just to say that?” I asked, a little exasperated by the remark.

I figured she couldn’t understand the intent behind my behavior and had judged this could be dangerous for our king. If there was something else behind her question, I couldn’t tell. For my part, I preferred that she didn’t harbor any strange suspicions about me.

“Unfortunately, I already made that request,” I admitted honestly. “Before being dispatched, that is. I was soundly refused.”

We were all pawns to our king. I’d already known that he wouldn’t listen no matter how much I implored him. If it were Anton... No, none of his other subjects would even consider such useless thoughts. I was the only failure.

“But maybe that was for the best,” I added. “Because of that, we’ve managed to form a connection between our king and Majima Takahiro, just as before.”

“I can’t understand. Not you, or the Second King,” Anton said, emotionlessly shaking her head. “No matter what happens, our king won’t stop. He just won’t. Do you truly believe that can change after

all this time?"

"Do I truly believe...?"

I smiled bitterly. I remembered what I'd told the slime when this topic had come up between us. My king and Majima Takahiro were definitely different. Despite starting from the same circumstances, they walked different paths. Their natures played a part in this, but I couldn't ignore that the slime had been the one to save Majima Takahiro.

No such being had appeared before my king. As a result, he had walked forth with despair and hatred in his heart. He couldn't be stopped anymore. My thoughts on this hadn't changed since talking to the slime. If anything had changed, it'd be my heart.

"You've got it wrong, Anton. Lacking in emotions as you are, though, you may not understand."

"What do you mean?"

"There's no logic behind it. Even if you know it's no good, you feel compelled to try. That is what emotions are."

During my time with Majima Takahiro and his servants, I'd come to realize my own desires. If my king continued down his path, he would one day meet ruin while in the throes of despair. I wanted to overturn that fate. I wanted him to at least meet his end with satisfaction, rather than despair. That was my wish...one that I knew would never be granted.

"I know without needing you to tell me, Anton. I will accomplish nothing, gain nothing, and die in disappointment."

Just as Anton said, there was no meaning to my behavior. I was being reckless, futile, and unproductive. This was what it meant to be a failure. Nevertheless, I couldn't stop dreaming.

"I see," Anton said, then cocked her head. "It's incomprehensible."

"I'm sure it is."

Having had no emotions from the very beginning, she simply couldn't understand.

"But there is something I do know now," she added.

"What?" I asked hesitantly.

"I've been suspicious of this all the while," Anton started, her face expressionless as a rock. "Why does our king keep you far away from him when you are the strongest among us? Emotions and whatnot shouldn't play a factor. But now I'm convinced that our king's decision was correct."

"Oh, is that right?"

I didn't need to be told that. My emotions were unnecessary to our king. He didn't want us to have desires, and so he alienated me. That was all there was to it.

"So what will you do?" I asked, not really refuting her statement.

“Will you eliminate me?”

Anton was questioning me like this because she found it dangerous that she couldn't read my intentions. Depending on the circumstances, this conversation could lead her to a perilous conclusion.

“I have no intention to,” she said, shaking her head. “Your behavior is indeed incomprehensible to me. Nevertheless, I know you will not become a threat to our king. You may do as you like, just as you have.”

Having finished asking what she wanted to ask, Anton turned on her heel.

“Do take care of your health,” she added. “Even if you have resolved yourself to meet your end in vain, I doubt you want to die a meaningless death. The situation among the visitors is fairly unstable... Although, for both our king and the Second King, it is no skin off their noses.”

“What?”

“You may show the Second King the information you were handed. Perhaps he'll realize something.”

With that, Anton returned to the cave.

“Meaning something happened?” I mumbled to myself, feeling the weight of the leather satchel I'd been handed. “Something related to visitors?”

I suddenly recalled Iino Yuna, the girl I'd had the chance to speak with a little. She'd called me “a pet wagging its tail while its owner abused it.” After that, she'd taught me what a pet was. Mysteriously, that conversation had remained on my mind all this time. She was an extremely troublesome enemy for my king, but I simply couldn't harbor any animosity toward her.

She was a visitor too. Even if these events had nothing to do with Majima Takahiro, would it involve her? I was curious what this was all about, but I would never open the letter I'd been entrusted with. I couldn't read in the first place. I shook my heads, eradicating those useless thoughts, and began running.

Chapter 3: Rose's Relaxation

"Oh? Did you need something, Master?" Rose asked, cocking her head curiously.

"Not really. I just came to see you."

"Is that so?"

She smiled, her features the very definition of delicate. There was warmth behind her smile too. Both her gestures and her expressions looked natural now. She apparently couldn't make any major changes in her expression, but there was nothing uncanny to her mannerisms anymore. Nobody would think she was a puppet now.

"Please, come on in."

She opened the door to her room and went back inside. Her footsteps were light, and she cheerfully readied a chair for me. The mental path was also informing me of how pleased she was with my visit.

Rose was usually calm, but once in a while, she would act somewhat childish. In most cases, it was related to her creations, but today seemed different.

With those thoughts in mind, I stepped into the room as she spun on the spot.

"I'll prepare some tea," she said, wiping her hands, which were dirty from working, using a wet towel she'd prepared.

"You don't have to," I replied casually, taking a seat in the chair Rose had readied for me. In the next instant, I realized my mistake.

Rose had come to a sudden stop. "Is it unnecessary...?" she mumbled. Her expression hadn't changed, but she was clearly dejected.

"Oh. No. I'd be happy if you could make some for me."

"In that case, I'll prepare some tea."

Rose quickly got to work. At times like this, it was nice how easy she was to understand.

"Actually, it's kind of rare to see you preparing tea, Rose," I commented.

"You're right. Normally, Mana does it," Rose replied, pulling a magic bag from her apron pocket. "But for the last few days, Mana and I were often working on separate matters, so she taught me beforehand."

"Hm? You don't drink, though, do you?"

No matter how much she made herself look human, she couldn't digest food. Even if Katou wasn't around, Rose didn't need to know how to make tea.

"I don't," Rose answered, pulling the few utensils she needed out of her bag. "But I figured you might drop by to visit, Master."

I was stunned silent by that one.

"Hee hee. It seems to have come in handy rather quickly," Rose said with a giggle.



In other words, Rose had hypothesized—or maybe hoped for—a situation that might never have come, and had prepared for it. I felt a little awkward about that. Maybe it was a good idea to create more opportunities like this for her.

As I considered that, Rose turned my way while boiling some water in a magic utensil.

“In any case, I thought you were taking part in the talks with the villagers,” she said. “Have you finished?”

“More or less,” I answered, sighing.

One week had passed since we’d repulsed the Fourth Company of the Holy Order from Shiran and Kei’s hometown of Kehdo. We’d been busy ever since. There were many things that had to be decided, and many things that had to be done.

First and foremost, seeing as we were in the Woodlands, there was a risk that the deceased would turn into ghouls, so we had to do the memorial service before anything else. Second, it had been decided that the outer wall of the village would be abandoned, leaving them with just one wall. While we were staying here, we had plenty of strength to fight, but we didn’t have enough hands to go around and cover the entire perimeter. Now that there were fewer villagers living here, it had been decided that the inner plots were enough.

In a sense, this was good news for the people of Kehdo. They weren’t really sure what to do yet. They could abandon the village altogether and move to a neighboring one, but they were also thinking of a way to stay here. Losing a reclamation village meant losing the whole region for humanity, after all. What’s more, the elves of reclamation villages all supported one another, so losing one could also lead to more danger for all the others. If at all possible, it was preferable to keep the village going.

Fortunately, the village’s facilities were still standing, so with a flow of immigrants from their neighbors, the village could be revived. Even if they had yet to make a decision one way or the other, Melvin’s promise to cooperate was very reassuring for the people of Kehdo.

These talks all involved the future, but we’d also started dealing with more immediate matters. The other day, knights of the Holy Order had attacked Kehdo, killing innocent civilians. However, as far as Shiran knew, the upper echelon of the Holy Order, Marshal Harrison Addington and Vice Marshal Gordon Cavill, weren’t the type of people to enact such brutality.

It was much more likely that Travis had led his Fourth Company on a hunt for personal glory, but we had to consider the possibility that this wasn’t the case. If we discarded any chance to open a dialogue with the Holy Order, it would lead to a guaranteed

catastrophe.

The worst-case scenario for us would be a breakdown in our relationship with the Holy Order because of this incident. We had to somehow open talks with them and avoid further conflict. But first, we had to find a way to contact them. That was why I'd suggested asking the Akerian royal family to be an intermediary.

The commander of the Third Company of the Alliance Knights, the one who'd invited us to Aker, was a princess here. Also, since the elves who'd been attacked were citizens of Aker, the royal family could be said to be a concerned party. With those two reasons in mind, we considered the royal family our most likely avenue for contacting the Holy Order and had entrusted Leah with a letter to them when she departed for Rapha.

One of Rapha's villagers was probably on their way to Diospyro with the letter by now. Luckily, Shiran's former comrade, Adolf, was currently stationed there as part of the Royal Army. To increase the probability of success, Katou and I had included our signatures as visitors, and Shiran had included hers as well. With that, they couldn't ignore our request.

Aside from all that, we also had to suppress the monsters drawn by the tumult of our battle with the Holy Order, keep an eye out for another attack from the knights, and discuss the future of the village with the villagers. Time had flown by in a flash. Just now, I'd finally gotten some space to catch my breath.

"Sorry, Rose," I said, putting down my teacup after taking a sip. "I ended up putting quite a lot on your plate."

Rose was definitely the busiest of us all. She had to restore and reinforce the walls, repair the broken houses, perform maintenance on damaged weapons and armor, and resupply the imitation runestones we'd consumed—among many, many other things.

"It's fine," she said. "Please don't worry about it. I'm happy to have a job to do."

"So you say..."

I knew Rose was being serious, but I felt like I was taking advantage of her. Judging by her progress, Rose hadn't gotten any rest whatsoever since the battle with the Holy Order ended. Perhaps this very moment was her first breather.

As a puppet, she didn't need sleep, but she still felt mental fatigue. Even if Rose could endure it, it didn't mean it was okay to overburden her. But considering Rose's personality, she wouldn't rest even if it were suggested to her, and ordering her to do so felt a little wrong. I wondered about what to do as I stared at her, and she blinked back at me in confusion.



"I was wondering what you wanted advice for. That's it?"

A sigh shook the air in the room. There was exasperation, but also happiness, behind it.

"You looked so serious, so I thought something had happened."

Katou giggled, putting a hand to her mouth.

"Aah, um, sorry," I said awkwardly, scratching my cheek. "It might seem too carefree at a time like this, but..."

"No. I don't think so at all," Katou replied, shaking her head.

"We've already played the cards we have, and discussed everything we had to in full detail. All that's left is to wait and see how the other party responds... And we've already thought about the possible developments in that regard too."

"Yeah."

"So it's fine to think about stuff like this too."

Katou was a lot wiser than me. I'd gone to her for advice countless times over the last week. She knew everything I knew about the current situation.

"Besides, Rose is just as important. I'm also happy that you're giving her some thought, Senpai," she said with a delighted smile. She truly did look pleased as Rose's best friend. She then clenched her dainty fists and pumped herself up. "Please leave it to me. You just need Rose to relax, right? In that case, I have an idea."

Katou was ever so reliable, and I was sure it'd be fine in her hands. Relieved by this thought, I entrusted the matter entirely to her.



Things were...*supposed* to be fine in her hands.

Huh? Isn't this a little different from what we discussed? I thought, which was my honest impression of the scene before me.

"Hey, doll lady, wanna play?"

A small girl, only about waist-high against an adult, innocently cocked her head. She had pointy ears and beady eyes, and she held a fabric doll against her chest. The doll was obviously quite old, seeing as how it was frayed all over. It was most likely a hand-me-down.

Present in this room were the youngest children who'd survived the Holy Order's attack, one of the women from the village, Rose, Katou, and myself.

"Ummm..."

Rose sounded perplexed. Faced with the beady-eyed girl looking up at her, Rose stiffened, her hand partially held out.

"What's the matter, Rose?" Katou asked.

"Mana..." Rose said, pleading for help with her eyes. "Um, I feel

like she'll break if I touch her."

The woman with us shuddered at the thought. Anxiety faintly colored her graceful and youthful features. She glanced at us for a moment, but Katou didn't pay her any mind.

"You're worrying too much," Katou said. "I'm sure this is your first time interacting with a child this young, so I understand that you're nervous, but it'll be fine so long as you're careful."

"But she's even smaller and thinner than you are, Mana. It already feels like you'll break from the slightest touch."

"Uhhh... Nobody breaks from just touching them. You really do worry about the weirdest things. Well, I'm happy that you worry about me, though."

Katou let out a sigh as the woman gave her a curious look.

"Miss Mana?" she called in a friendly tone.

"Yes, yes. I know. Come on, Rose."

"Very well..."

Rose finally moved. The way she pursed her lips as if hardening her resolve looked more as though she were preparing to head into battle. However, in contrast to her determined expression, her hand moved very timidly toward the girl.

"Ah..."

The girl grasped Rose's hand with her tiny fingers. Rose looked surprised, while the girl smiled innocently at her. That was all it took to melt Rose's tension. She visibly relaxed and held the girl's hand as if handling the most fragile of objects.

"Let's play," the girl said.

"Of course."

The girl laughed and pulled Rose's hand, having her take a seat on the floor. Seeing this, the other children gathered around them. The girls seemed to want to play house. Rose had no idea what that was, so the children did their best to explain it to her. They weren't very good at getting to the point, but Rose listened to them attentively. Once she got started, Rose was a well-mannered, thoughtful, and superb babysitter.

Yes. Babysitting. That was the reason we were here.

"Hey? Katou?" I whispered, unable to grasp the situation. "What are we doing here?"

"Oh. Right. About that, Senpai," Katou said, keeping an eye on Rose as she leaned over to me. "Actually, I've been thinking about something for the last few days."

She was close enough that nobody could hear us. A sweet scent drifted through that defenseless distance to my nose, but there was nothing sweet about Katou's expression.

"You've noticed, haven't you?" she asked, throwing a quick glance

at the woman with us. "She's a little wary of Rose."

"Yeah."

"That's unavoidable, really," Katou said with a sad smile. "The village's people have approved of Rose being here, even knowing what she is, but that's only because she's your servant. You might not like to hear it put like that, though."

"I understand. In short, it's the same as when we were working with the Alliance Knights and Fort Tilia's soldiers."

Back then, Fort Tilia's forces hadn't accepted my servants as individuals. In an extreme sense, they'd treated my servants like my weapons.

"Yes. At the time, it didn't matter," Katou continued. "But as long as we're staying here, I don't think that can stand. We're short on hands, after all."

"That time, we could leave outside matters to the Alliance Knights and avoid any friction by staying locked up inside. This time, however, we have to interact with the villagers here."

"Exactly. Fortunately, this situation is a little different. This is Shiran's hometown. Even though she's now an undead monster, they still see her as one of their own. That's why they see the others in a slightly different light from normal."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. I think this is a good opportunity."

For the last few days, Katou had been taking care of the village's children during the afternoons. The few surviving adults were very busy, so there weren't enough people to watch them. Judging by the short exchange between Katou and the village woman, Katou had been doing well, living up to her claim of liking kids. That was how she'd come up with this idea.

In that sense, I understood why she'd chosen Rose. Gerbera looked too much like a monster, and Lobivia's personality made it difficult for her to get along with others. It was best to start with Katou, then expand the circle with her best friend Rose, then keep going from there.

"But why did you call me too?" I asked.

"Two reasons. First, with you here, they'll be less wary of Rose."

"Hm? Wouldn't your presence suffice?"

If my servants were interacting with the villagers on their own, then I could understand being anxious. Still, I didn't have to be the one with them.

"I understand having a visitor around makes it easy to gain trust in this world," I added, "but the same goes for you, right?"

"The reason so many people trust you isn't only because you're a visitor, Senpai," she answered, smiling wryly. "Everyone is grateful

that you risked your life to save them. I'm betting they're far more grateful than you think."

I couldn't say anything to that.

"You stood as the last line of defense to protect the house that all the villagers were hiding in," she continued. "Everyone knows you volunteered to fight somewhere far away from the safety of the walls. That's the other reason I called you here. They're all uneasy after the devastation the village suffered. Your mere presence brings them peace of mind."

"Really?"

"Yup. As far as I can tell, at least. They all see you as the heroic savior who protected them."

"A savior...?"

"Yes. Although, it could have something to do with you getting more intimate with Shiran lately," she added teasingly.

I awkwardly scratched my cheek. There was a facet of truth to her words. The bonds between the elves who lived in these rigorous lands was strong. The people gathered in a village were practically a single family. Shiran was one of them, and she also belonged to the bloodline of the village chiefs who led them. Despite her disadvantageous position in this world as an elf, she'd risen to the rank of lieutenant in the Alliance Knights. She was like a hero to them. And now that I'd entered into a special relationship with her, it wouldn't be strange if they started treating me like family.

"Well, I get what you're saying," I muttered. "But there's still something I don't quite understand."

"What's that?"

"I thought I came to you for advice regarding Rose. How'd that lead to this?"

I was grateful that Katou had arranged this, but that was a different matter. I'd wanted to give the hardworking Rose some rest. Babysitting was soothing for someone who liked kids as Katou did, but Rose wasn't used to children. Katou was smart enough to know this.

"Huh?" She blinked a few times in confusion. "Oh, you've got it wrong."

"How so?"

"You're Rose's greatest treat, Senpai."

"What?"

"So long as she can be with you, there's nothing more enjoyable for her."

I froze at how casually she'd said that.

"That's why I chose a job she could do with you," Katou added. "And, like I said, we can improve our relationship with the elves like this too, so it's two birds with one stone. If you count putting the

children at ease, then it's three birds." She smiled, then circled around me. "That's the gist of it. So, come on. You too, Senpai."

Her soft hands pressed against my back and pushed me toward Rose.

"Master."

Rose turned around and looked up at me. Her voice was cheerful, and her expression full of joy. I could hear my heart thumping. The way she so honestly showed her adoration seemed even cuter than usual.

"Is something wrong?" Rose asked curiously.

"N-No. It's nothing," I said, brushing off the topic as I took a seat next to her. I wasn't very confident that I'd kept my blush hidden, though.

And just like that, Rose and I helped Katou out a little in the afternoon. Our days passed by like this until a messenger from Diospyro arrived.

Chapter 4: The Messenger from Diospyro

After discussing a few things with the elves, I returned to my room. There I heard someone humming. I couldn't catch any sort of melody, but the innocent ring to it conveyed how much fun she was having.

"What are you up to, Gerbera?" I asked.

"Oh, My Lord. Welcome back," she answered. She was holding some cloth and a sewing needle in her hands. "Just as you can see, I'm making a doll."

"A doll?"

Looking closer at her hands, I could see the bundle of cloth was a half-finished doll. It was a little hard to tell with only the upper body, but it seemed to be a doll of a girl.

"The village children we've been watching asked if she could make them," Rose said, working on her own things in the same room.

"Aah, I see."

As part of our interactions with the villagers, Rose had been watching the children every now and then. The other day, Gerbera had also joined in. Some of the children had cried at the sight of her spider legs, but in the end, they'd all gotten along. That was probably when they'd asked for this.

"One is already done. Come take a look."

Gerbera put down her work and held out a doll to me. It really was modeled after a girl, somewhat resembling Lily.

"The cloth is made from my threads, so it's very sturdy," she said, puffing her chest out with pride. It truly was a well-made doll.

"It looks great," I commented.

"Right? Right?" Gerbera smiled in great humor. "I'm relieved to hear you say that, My Lord. Very well, I'll keep making them like that. Oh, I just came up with a great idea." Gerbera clapped her hands together. "After I finish the dolls for the children, I'll make one for you too!"

"For me?"

My eyes went wide at the unexpected statement. Immediately after that, another unexpected thing happened.

"Out of the question."

Someone firmly refused. I turned to look and saw Rose had risen

to her feet.

“Absolutely out of the question,” she repeated.

“Hrm? Uhhh?”

Gerbera’s eyes darted about. She was completely baffled by Rose’s refusal. Rose looked indignant. She wore a very childish expression, which was rather unusual when compared to her calm demeanor.

“Why not?” Gerbera asked.

Rose clenched her fists in front of her chest, then, as fervently as possible, said, “Our master already has me.”

What is she even saying? I thought to myself, but she looked dead serious. Her eyes were shooting daggers at the doll in my hands. She was acting like a child who felt her place was being threatened by a new sibling.

“Our master has me. He doesn’t need any other dolls.”

She puffed out her cheeks and pouted. She was definitely serious, but she was feeling threatened by a simple cloth doll. When I thought of it like that, it was pretty silly. Rose hadn’t noticed it and kept going.

“As such—” She met my eyes, and with that, she finally realized she was behaving strangely. “No, of course, it’s your decision, Master,” she said, sitting back down despondently. “Forgive me. I went too far.”

“It’s fine. I don’t mind,” I told her.

As a magical puppet, perhaps a part of Rose was instinctually akin to a doll. Even if that gave rise to a competitive spirit and jealousy, it was actually just cute.

“In any case, I’ll pass,” I added, handing the doll back to Gerbera. “Guys don’t really want stuff like this, especially at my age.”

“Hmm. Is that so?” Gerbera let out a huff as she fidgeted with the doll in her hands. “In that case, I’ll have to pick another present to give you.”

“You don’t have to force yourself to give me anything.”

“I want to.”

“If you insist...”

Gerbera smiled cheerfully. If she liked doing this, then I didn’t have any objections. She started pondering over things as I watched her with a—

“I suppose it must be that. The maid outfit. I just have to put it on and show you, right?”

“Hang on,” I cut in. I’d planned to just sit back and let her do as she pleased, but that wasn’t going to fly here. “What do you mean? How’d you come to that conclusion?”

“Kaneki told me that all men want to see the woman they like wearing a maid outfit,” she answered, blinking in confusion.

“Him again?”

I could just picture Mikihiko giving me a thumbs up. He’d clearly told her this to get a laugh out of it. I sighed and pinched my brow.

“Is there a problem?” Gerbera asked.

“No... It’s not a problem or anything...”

How could I have a problem? The thought, “Mikihiko, you ass,” did cross my mind, though.

“That’s good then,” Gerbera said, smiling. “In truth, I’ve already started. I’ve thought of making ones for Lily and all the others too, but I haven’t made much progress in that regard.”

She began happily telling me about her work. She’d said so herself—she was doing this because she wanted to.

“But I can’t possibly cut corners. It’s meant to bewitch you, after all.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

I didn’t mind it if Gerbera was having fun, so I just shrugged. Besides, if asked whether I wanted to see my lovers wearing cute clothing, then of course my answer was yes.

At any rate, we passed our time peacefully like this while we finished what work we had to get done. However, a sudden visit brought our time to an end.

“Hrm?”

Gerbera’s red eyes turned to the door. We could hear hurried footsteps from the hallway, then the door flung open.

“Takahiro! So this is where you’ve been!” Kei said, flying into the room. “Someone is approaching the village!”

She must’ve sprinted all the way here. She was bent over with both hands on her knees while gasping for air, speaking as best she could.

“Lobivia was on watch, and told me to tell you,” she added.

“Got it. Kei, get somewhere safe. Gerbera, tell the others, then hide somewhere for now. Rose, come with me.”

Immediately after I gave out my orders, I started running. I left the building and headed straight for the village walls. I looked up at the watchtower and wrapped my arm around Rose’s waist. Asarina shot from my left hand and pulled us to the top of the tower.

“Lobivia, I heard someone’s approaching the village?” I asked the girl who was already up there.

“Yeah, sure is,” she replied curtly. Despite her attitude, she was diligently doing her job. She looked ready for war, hiding the keen presence of a beast behind her childish features. “Over there.”

I looked to where she pointed. A group of people were walking down the path between the fields. They’d passed through the village’s outer walls already. There were seven of them, and they were all

armed.

"I thought it'd be the Royal Army, but that doesn't seem to be the case," Rose commented.

"They're not the Holy Order," I said, nodding back to her.

"I haven't seen that outfit before. I wonder who they are?"

"Who knows? Either way, we'll just have to go talk to them."

"Takahiro!" someone called.

I turned around and spotted Shiran running toward the bottom of the tower. I immediately had Asarina pull her to the top.

"Thank you," she said as she settled in.

"You noticed too?"

"Yes. Who...?" Shiran started, but upon spotting the group marching toward the village, her blue eye shot open. "That armor..."

"You know them?"

Shiran nodded, keeping her eye on the armed group. "That's the Order of National Defense."

"You mean...they're Akerian knights?!"

Aker was protected by the Royal Army and the Order of National Defense. The army focused on defending the towns they were stationed in, whereas the order actively suppressed monsters across the nation. I hadn't expected them to show up here. And that wasn't the only unexpected thing either.

"Also, that's... It can't be," Shiran continued, her eye still wide. "There's no mistaking it. That crest on his armor...is the royal family's."



Seeing as these were official knights of Aker, we had to deal with them in some way. There was also the possibility that they were enemies too. We maintained our vigilance as we descended the watchtower and awaited their arrival.

I asked Lobivia to inform the others and to hide with them inside the buildings. I'd told her to get ready to jump out at any time, depending on the other party's behavior. In her stead, I had Lily come out to guard us.

We waited outside the gate, and after several minutes, the knights arrived and came to a stop in front of us. One among them stepped forth. He had silver hair and was wearing armor with the royal family's crest emblazoned on it.

"My name is Philip Kendall. It is an honor to make your acquaintance," he said, taking a bow. "Please just call me Philip."

I had a cursory understanding of this country, so I knew that was the name of Aker's second prince. He was the commander's older brother.

“Philip, is it? My name is Majima Takahiro.”

I returned his greeting and observed him. He looked to be around thirty and didn't really resemble the commander. While she looked gallant, he looked relatively gentle. I gave Shiran a quick glance, and she nodded back to me. As a knight from Aker, she must've seen several members of the royal family. This man was definitely the actual second prince.

“And that's Shiran over there, right? It's been a while. You've grown so much,” Philip said.

“You remember me?” Shiran asked, a look of surprise on her face.

“Yes. How many years has it been now? You were among the knights who came to greet the royal family before being dispatched to Fort Tilia, weren't you?”

Philip narrowed his eyes nostalgically. That eased some of the tension in the air.

“Where was it? I don't think it was in the capital,” he added.

“It was in Soyaq,” Shiran answered. “Back then, I was nothing more than one of many squires. I thought you would've forgotten me by now.”

“Not at all. You looked like a promising youth at the time. ‘Like brother, like sister,’ I thought to myself. Still, even the fabled strongest knight of the northern Woodlands was rather nervous back then.”

Embarrassed by the mention of her childhood, Shiran lowered her eye a little. She glanced my way to check my reaction. Impressed, Philip breathed a sigh. He smiled, but that smile suddenly turned bitter.

“But I see now... If Shiran is here, then it must all be true.”

“You knew I'd be here?” Shiran asked. “No, before that, why have you even come?”

“Because I saw the letter.” Philip corrected his posture and turned my way. “Takahiro. I believe you sent a letter to Diospyro the other day. Upon seeing it, I came out here.”

“So that's why?”

Our letter had apparently reached Diospyro safely. Adolf had received it and passed it on to the upper brass, and then even the royal family took a look. The letter contained details of the Holy Order's attack on Kehdo, as well as a few requests. That was what had brought Philip here...but the timing felt off.

“I thought it'd take a little longer for this to reach any royalty,” I said.

It had only been two weeks since I'd entrusted Leah with that letter. Diospyro was five days away, so that was plenty of time for the letter to get there and for someone to come here, but there hadn't been enough time for it to get all the way to the capital.

“Just as you say, I doubt the news has reached the capital yet,” Philip said. “But we just happened to be staying in Diospyro. That is how we were able to get here today.”

“You were in Diospyro?”

“Yes. Lately, there have been many monster sightings from the villages near Diospyro. Because of that, I brought some of the Order of National Defense there.”

“Aah, that’s why...”

Now that I thought of it, during the incident with Lobivia—when we were talking about how to deal with the stray dragon—the Order of National Defense had apparently been on their way to Diospyro to handle the situation. I’d also heard that in Aker, where half the country was covered by the Woodlands, the royal family personally led the Order of National Defense on the field, running about from east to west across the entire nation. Philip was also engaged in such activities. He didn’t resemble his sister, but the two of them were alike in this respect.

“I’ve come today with hopes of hearing the details regarding the contents of your letter,” he said.

“Understood.”

At the very least, they weren’t enemies. That was enough for me. There was no reason for us to continue talking outside like this.

“First, let’s find a place for you to catch your breath and put away your luggage.”

We were already well prepared. We’d known that someone from Diospyro would eventually come, so we’d set up a place for their visit. A royal visit was beyond our expectations, but we could still go with what we had ready.

“Lily, please show them the way.”

“Okay, leave it to me.”

“Thank you for your consideration, sir,” Philip said. “Well then, we’ll talk later.”

I left the knights to Lily and returned with Shiran to the house we were staying in. Using this time, I consulted with her, seeing as she was familiar with Aker’s state of affairs. Perhaps under the impression that she shouldn’t keep us waiting, Lily dropped by with Philip around twenty minutes later. Still, that was enough time for us to have prepared. We ushered them into the room.

“I apologize for keeping you waiting,” Philip said. “Oh? That’s...?”

“An honor to make your acquaintance, Prince Philip. I am Leah, the wife of the neighboring village’s chief.”

“Aah, I’ve heard about you from Melvin. Ummm...”

“I called her here to participate,” I said. “Will that be fine?”

“If that is the case, then of course I don’t mind.”

As we talked, we gathered around a table and took a seat.

"I asked Dennis to look after the knights," Lily said, exchanging a quick look with me.

"Got it. Thanks."

Philip and his knights didn't know about our circumstances. They didn't know about what had happened to Shiran's body, or about what exactly their guide Lily was, or about those who were hiding elsewhere in the village. If the knights were to walk around unsupervised, it could lead to trouble. Lily had likely left them with Dennis under such instructions.

"E-Excuse me."

Next, Kei came in. I'd asked her to prepare some tea. She looked nervous, but that was pretty normal considering she was in front of royalty.

With our preparations done, Philip took a sip of tea before starting. Maybe he was nervous too.

"Now then, allow me to start from the beginning," he began stiffly. "I've read through the contents of your letter, sir. Is it true the Holy Order attacked this village?"

"Yes."

So we had to start all the way back there. Not that this was a surprise. Any person with normal sensibilities would find it unthinkable for a knight to turn their sword against a civilian. For the Holy Order to do such a thing, Philip and the others would probably think they were having a nightmare. Travis's deed had been shockingly irrational, so I could understand Philip's doubts. I'd predicted them too.

"Everything is as I've written. Isn't that right, Leah?"

"Yes, it is all as Takahiro says," she answered. I'd asked her to be here to corroborate the details. "If you'd like, you may speak with the people of the village after this. They were the ones who were attacked. They should be able to tell you the specifics."

There was no reason for us to lie to them if they could find out the truth right after, and Philip could see that. The crease remained in his brow simply because he couldn't believe it.

"Please forgive me for doubting you," he said. "Even if this comes from the mouth of a savior, this is very hard for me to believe. What could possibly compel the Holy Order to attack this village? Why would they come to such a remote region to cut down villagers? This must be some sort of mistake."

I could sense his true intent in those last words. Philip had come here to verify the truth. Shiran had concluded the same in the short time we'd consulted earlier. The Holy Order's attack on the reclamation village was unthinkable by normal standards. If this

hadn't come from me and Katou—who were considered saviors in this world—the famous knight Shiran, Leah, and all the elves who were involved, they certainly wouldn't have given us the time of day.

That was exactly why Philip had come personally. He knew what Shiran looked like, so he could confirm if it was really her. Looking back on things with that in mind, the conversation earlier had been a sort of test. It had proved her identity, which had turned Philip's expression bitter. In other words, it had increased the veracity of the Holy Order's attack.

In short, they suspected us of lying. Not that I blamed them for it. Philip's expression was taut, offering a glimpse of his desperation. I could understand why he was acting that way, though. He was doubting the words of a savior.

For example, say he angered me or Katou—angered a savior, to be precise. It wasn't hard to imagine that the world at large would shower him with criticism. Still, he'd come here to verify the details of the Holy Order's attack, fully prepared to take all responsibility.

This actually gave me a good impression of him. It was only right to give him a show of good faith. We couldn't make any progress while we kept a lid on things, anyway. Shiran had informed me that Philip had a reputation as a splendid prince who fulfilled his duties. He also seemed trustworthy from what I'd seen so far.

This was a good opportunity. Someone in a place of authority had come to see us with such sincerity, after all.

"I understand how you feel, but all of it is true," I said. "The mastermind behind the attack was Sir Travis Mortimer of the Holy Gaze, commander of the Fourth Company of the Holy Order. The reason he attacked the village...is because of me and Shiran."

"What do you mean...?"

"I will tell you everything. Please remain calm and listen."

I went on to explain everything about why Travis had attacked this village without leaving anything out.



"How can that be?" Philip muttered, looking awfully shaken by my story. "The power to grant monsters hearts...? And Shiran is undead...?"

He was in a daze. Kei refilled his empty teacup. Philip downed its contents in a hurry, then let out a huge sigh. He then jerked up to look at Kei.

"It can't be... You too?"

"Huh...? N-No! I'm not!" Kei replied, shaking her head vigorously.

"I-I see..." Philip said, looking truly relieved.

"Oh, but Lily is a monster," Kei added.

“Sure am!” Lily exclaimed, turning her fingers into slimy tentacles.



A loud clatter suddenly echoed in the room. Philip groaned, having knocked his chair backward. His gentle features were twisted and twitching. I couldn't even say he was overreacting. This was normal in this world.

"F-Forgive me. That was rude," he said, coming back to his senses. I shook my head. "It's fine. I understand."

Unlike Shiran and Kei, Philip hadn't had the opportunity to know Lily before this, nor had she or any of the others saved his life like they had with the villagers. I'd expected it to be difficult for him to accept this immediately. It could take hours, maybe even days, but we had no choice but to wait. The room naturally fell silent—

"By the way, Keikei here says that, but I'm also human," Lily said to the pale prince, unexpectedly speaking up. No, this wasn't Lily. Her tone and the atmosphere around her were a little different. "I'm sorry for not introducing myself sooner. I'm Mizushima Miho. I'm a visitor just like Majima."

"Huh...? What?"

Philip looked utterly confused. It didn't show on my face, but I was also surprised. We hadn't discussed Mizushima showing herself here.

"Look, I share the same kinda facial features as Majima, right? Don't you find that weird? I look different from the people of this world. I'm another visitor."

"Th-That's true, but she called you a monster earlier..."

"I'll leave out the details, but I'm inside this girl."

"A savior in a monster...?" Philip's eyes shot open in shock, then turned my way. "It can't be... How can that...?"

He could see from our faces that Mizushima was telling the truth. All strength left his body. He planted his hand against the table as if to stop himself from collapsing. To the people of this world, saviors were the light of hope, whereas monsters were the manifestations of fear and despair. It must've been hard to accept that a revered savior was inside a monster.

"You can just think of it as my having turned into a monster if you want. In that sense, I'm not all that different from Shiran," Mizushima said, looking down at him. It felt as if she was driving him further into a corner, but I could tell right away that that wasn't the case. "Philip. What do you think of me?"

She was both a savior and a monster. Philip gulped. Mizushima's testing gaze remained fixed on him. A moment of silence dragged on. Before long, Philip exhaled slowly, then smiled, a slightly bittersweet air about him.

"Please forgive me, madam," he said, his expression much more

relaxed now. “You may laugh it off as the timidity of a worthless simpleton.”

“Hmm, it’s fine. Given time, I figured you’d come to accept it. That’s why I was a little forceful,” Mizushima said, grinning. “But it’s better to get the hard stuff over with real quick, right?”

Philip gave her a wry smile. “You have a point there. I stand defeated.”

“Ha ha. You flatter me... Just kidding. It’s actually half-borrowed knowledge,” Mizushima said, looking my way awkwardly and scratching her cheek. “I don’t have to tell you, do I? It was Mana’s idea.”

“That makes sense,” I said.

I thought the approach seemed familiar. That said, Miho was still pretty clever for pulling it off like that. I could understand how the two of them had gotten along back in our world.

“I’ll have to thank Mana later. I’m sure she’ll be happy,” Mizushima said with a smile—one that quickly became teasing. “She says that, Master, but Miho was the one wondering if there was anything she could do to help. She thought this up with Katou, you see, and th— H-Hey! Cut it out, Lilz! That’s cheating!”

Her expression changed blindingly fast. Mizushima shrieked in a panic, shot me a glance, then groaned in frustration. Her face turned red right to the tips of her ears.

“Th-That’s the gist of it. You handle the rest, Majima,” she said in a fluster, trying to turn the attention away from herself.

“Thanks, Mizushima. You really helped out.”

Mizushima bit her lip. She seemed both embarrassed and happy.

“You’re welcome.”

She relaxed her shoulders and smiled. After waving her hand, she switched back out with Lily.

Chapter 5: A Promise of Aid

“Jeez... That Miho. She’s so shy,” Lily complained, pursing her lips.

“Thanks for telling me, Lily,” I said.

“You’re welcome.”

“But cut her a little more slack.”

“Awww, but that’s just about the right amount of teasing for her. She’s actually happy.”

“Really?”

“Yup. She’s grinning like an idiot inside me... Oh, now she’s flailing.”

“Try not to tease her too much.”

“You get along so well,” Philip said, rolling his shoulder. “And you seem to have quite the close relationship.”

The gentle light had returned to his eyes as he watched the two of us interact. He’d apparently recovered from the shock of the unbelievable news we’d shared with him.

“I still find it hard to believe that you’re a monster... Oh, forgive me, that was a slip of the tongue.”

“It’s fine. You’re overthinking things,” I told him, shaking my head. “They’re still monsters, and there’s no point in denying that. One day, I hope everyone can accept them for what they are.”

“That’s quite a thorny path you walk.”

“It’s the one I chose,” I declared without hesitation.

“I see. Decisiveness worthy of a savior. I can understand why the strongest knight of the northern Woodlands has acknowledged you.”

Philip let out a long sigh. I wondered what emotion hid behind that gesture.

“Now that you’ve told me so much, I cannot doubt your words anymore,” he continued with another bittersweet smile. “I apologize for doubting you at all. I will take full responsibility for my behavior.”

“Don’t worry about it. I don’t mind. More importantly, I’d like to discuss the future.”

Philip had acknowledged the truth, but that wasn’t the main point we’d wanted to discuss. That had just been the preamble.

“Will you lend us your aid?” I asked, waiting for his answer with bated breath.

“Please be at ease, sir,” he said with a gentle smile. “I also believe

that we must prevent any further tragedy from this incident.”

He sounded both anxious and determined.

“Then...!” My breath caught in my throat, and I bent forward in excitement, knocking my cup slightly but not paying it any attention.

“Yes. I will appeal to the king regarding your request for assistance.”

“Thank you very much.”

I got the answer I wanted. A way of handling things was now in sight.

“There is no need to thank me, Takahiro,” Philip said, shaking his head. “Lending a great savior our aid is only a matter of course. Also, now that we know this attack was real and you repelled it, you are our citizens’ benefactor. We are the ones who should be thanking you. Your selfless conduct has simply come back to reward you. Besides...” Philip paused, a steely aura radiating from his gentle features. “The Akerian royalty must strongly protest the Holy Order’s actions concerning this incident. I’m not saying this is the price for our cooperation, but I’m hoping you will assist us in this endeavor.”

“Of course. I’ll do anything I can.” I’d planned to do so from the very beginning. This was all give-and-take, and I had no objections to helping each other wherever we could.

Our conversation then shifted to more concrete details.

“First, we must contact the Holy Order,” Philip started.

“Currently, a messenger is on the way to the king with your request. They were dispatched at the same time I left to come here to ascertain your letter’s veracity, so once I return, I will inform the king of the truth.”

“Thank you. When you leave, would you take a letter addressed to the Holy Order with you? Ultimately, we’ll have to discuss things in person, but before that, I believe it best to explain to them what happened.”

“We were planning to explain things once we prepared a venue for these discussions...but it does seem like a letter written by you would be a good idea. Very well. Please hand it to me when you can.”

“Also, seeing as how we’re asking for aid, I think it’s only right we greet the king in person too. That is, of course, if it’s possible. Could you inform him of this too?”

“Yes, I will inform him with all certainty,” Philip agreed, but then his brow suddenly drooped, and his expression turned apologetic.

“Normally, if a savior was to visit our country, we would hold a banquet for them at the castle with all haste, but we must report this incident to the king before all else. Please forgive us for the inconvenience.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m not going to force the issue or be a

bother,” I said, shaking my head and smiling bitterly. I had no desire whatsoever to be received like a savior to begin with, so Philip’s guilt in this respect was unnecessary. “Besides, I can’t leave the village right now.”

“Forgive us. This would normally be our job, yet here we are imposing on you.”

“It’s fine. This is an irregular situation, and I know you’re short on hands as it is. This is also Shiran’s hometown. I want to protect the elves here.” From the corner of my eyes, I could see Shiran and Kei smiling. “Besides, my servants can stretch their legs out in this village.”

It was relaxing not having to hide. They didn’t have to be unnecessarily tense all the time. Also, Katou’s plan from the other day was going relatively well. For example, the woman who couldn’t help but be wary when we were watching the children was now slowly opening up to Rose. Gerbera was also making toys and such for the kids, so they had started to look up to her pretty quickly. It wouldn’t be much longer before all the other villagers opened up too.

“All the same, the only thing we can do is protect the village,” I said. “We need the country’s support to rebuild it. So how about it?”

“Hmm... Fortunately, the walls are still standing, and taking the neighboring villages into consideration, it would be unwise to abandon the place. If we are to bring in immigrants, then we definitely need some financial backing.”

Philip paused, sinking into thought for a bit before giving me a nod.

“Very well. We should be able to deliver on that front as well. However, the formalities will require some time. I’m sure there are things the village needs right away, so I’ll requisition them from the army’s storehouse at my discretion. It shouldn’t be a problem if we compensate them once the matter is formally settled.”

“Really? That helps a lot.”

It looked like I had some good news to tell the villagers. Philip, Akerian royalty, had promised to provide what aid we needed. All we could do now was leave it to Philip. We just had to prepare for what would come once we opened a dialogue with the Holy Order.

After delving into the details a little more, our talk with Philip came to an end.

“That about sums it up,” Philip said. “We’ll leave the village tomorrow and return to Diospyro.”

“Thank you. Please take it easy for the day and get some rest.”

We decided to have dinner together, so I signaled Lily to get some food ready. We had to take the future into account, and both sides wanted to get to know each other better too.

“Thank you for preparing this for us, Takahiro.”

“Not a problem. I hope it suits your tastes.”

Our dishes contained a lot of meat. Most of it was from monsters like azure hares. For the safety of the village, I’d asked Gerbera to hunt down the monsters in the vicinity, so a large supply of meat was a side benefit.

I’d asked Philip first, just in case, and he’d told me that monster meat wouldn’t be a problem. Even as royalty, he didn’t normally live a life of luxury, and when he was on active duty as a knight, his meals were the same as everyone else’s. He was actually pleased to have so much meat before him that wasn’t jerky.

“Lily made all this, correct?” Philip asked, deeply moved as he had a spoonful of soup. “It’s been nothing but surprises since I arrived. Well, three esteemed saviors visiting Aker at once is already shocking enough.”

Katou had also joined us for dinner. I’d told her to stay hidden while we were still unsure of Philip’s intentions, but now that he was cooperating with us, she’d said that it was only proper to at least show herself.

This was the first time she was having a meal with a man she’d only just met since she’d developed androphobia. She didn’t talk much, and she didn’t have much of an appetite, but she’d made enough progress to be able to attend.

“I heard an unprecedented number of saviors had arrived in our world,” Philip said, looking at Lily, Katou, and me one by one, “but I found it hard to believe the rumors. Seeing it for myself gives the rumors validity. I suppose the others have gone to the imperial capital?”

“I think so. I’ve heard some are headed that way, but I don’t know the details.”

“I see,” Philip said plainly, perhaps noticing that I wasn’t all that interested.

“Oh, but now that you mention it, the commander...um, your sister, was on the way to the capital with a savior.”

“Is that so?”

“His name is Mikihiko. He’s a good guy and trustworthy. So long as he’s with her, she shouldn’t find herself in too serious a predicament.”

Margrave Maclaurin had summoned the commander to the imperial capital to explain the attack on Fort Tilia and to take responsibility for it. This information was being kept from Aker’s citizens, but as she was a princess, the royal family knew. Because of that, I’d told Philip everything that had happened from the attack up until her arrest in Serrata.

I'd thought Philip would know something about what had transpired since then, but unfortunately, any further news had yet to reach him. There wasn't much we could do about that. Methods of transferring information across long distances were limited in this world. For example, it was normal for merchants to spend a month traveling from Serrata to Aker.

It would be different if they had those long-distance communication devices that were available at Fort Tilia and Fort Ebenus, but Aker had no such facilities. And since the commander was moving toward the imperial capital, it would take even longer for any information to reach us.

It had been four months since we parted ways with Mikihiko. It was supposed to take two to reach the imperial capital from Serrata, so he was probably already there. It wouldn't be surprising if all their talks and investigations regarding any responsibility were over by now. It was even possible that they were already on their way back here.

"I see. A savior is with her, then," Philip said, looking relieved. He then flashed a small smile at me. "By the way, Takahiro, are Mikihiko and my sister...?"

"Oh, no. They're not in a special relationship. As far as I know, anyway."

The commander had shown no signs of being interested, although Mikihiko was another matter. That was only according to what I'd seen, however. I didn't know what the truth was.

"I see..." Philip said dejectedly. "My little sister has always had a strong spirit. She even went as far as departing for Fort Tilia, claiming she would fulfill her duty as royalty. Even understanding that she could die at any moment, she has yet to marry despite being of age. I would personally prefer she consider her happiness as a woman with equal measure." He paused, letting out another sigh. "If she could just meet someone, I'd be able to relax a little..."

I personally found the commander to be an amazing person, but it seemed a sibling's perspective was different. This was good news for Mikihiko, who was head over heels for her. At this rate, he'd be able to make an ally of his sweetheart's older brother.

"In any case, I'm relieved to hear that a savior is accompanying her," Philip continued. "I suppose this is a boon of so many saviors arriving at once. It's something to be grateful for." He smiled, but then suddenly pursed his lips. "Nonetheless, please do be careful. There have been strange rumors on the wind lately."

"What rumors?"

"They say a fake savior has appeared far to the east."

"A fake savior?" I repeated, wide-eyed.

“So you aren’t aware. Maybe because so many saviors appeared at once, the rumor is that a scoundrel has been going around claiming to be a savior too.” Angered by the thought, Philip’s tone grew a little sharper. “You passed through Lorenz County and over the Kitrus Mountains to get into Aker, correct? The fake savior is said to be farther to the east of Lorenz County, beyond the borders of Viscum, in the small eastern territories of the Empire.”

“Huh...?” Katou blurted. She’d been quieter than usual during dinner, so that only attracted my attention all the more.

“What’s wrong, Katou?” I asked.

“It’s nothing serious, but...” Katou started, shrinking back slightly. “East of Viscum is pretty far away, isn’t it? I just think it’s weird that the rumors made it all the way here. Philip, can I ask when you heard these rumors?”

“Hm? Let me think... I believe it was just over a month ago,” Philip answered.

“Oh, okay. Thank you.” Katou sank into thought for a moment, curving her finger and pressing it against her chin. “I thought it might be related to the Holy Order, but...”

“To Travis?” I asked stiffly, unable to remain calm at the mention of the Holy Order. “But why would they?”

“Oh. No. I didn’t think it through that far. I drew an association since they would know of affairs beyond Aker’s borders...” Katou paused, then waved her hands. “Sorry, that was careless of me. A month is a fair amount of time before the Holy Order’s attack, so I doubt it’s related.”

She’d apparently thought of it like some kind of word-association game. It was unlike her to lack discretion like this, and she seemed to think so as well.

“I’m a little absentminded,” she said, getting up from her seat. “Sorry, but please excuse me.”

“Want me to take you to your room?” I asked.

“I’ll be fine. It’s right there at the top of the stairs,” Katou replied with a smile.

With that, she left the room. Had I pushed her a little too hard by having her join us for dinner? Even if she’d suggested it herself, maybe it had been a mistake to let her dine with a man she didn’t know. I decided I would go check on her right after this.

“She has a point,” I said, getting back on topic. “I’m surprised rumors of a fake savior have gotten this far. Is it really only about a fake showing up?”

“If that was all, then perhaps the rumors wouldn’t have reached us,” Philip answered.

“Meaning?” I asked, cocking my head.

“They say the villages where the fake savior appeared have suffered great damage. I don’t know the details, but rumors suggest that they were attacked by monsters.”

“By monsters? How does that even follow?”

“I don’t know, but some scoundrel is doing the unthinkable and claiming to be a savior. In all likelihood, the miscreant fooled the villagers and took their money. We believe that they then instigated monsters into attacking the villages to erase any evidence.”

“No matter how you put it, that’s a little...”

I was dumbfounded. Such behavior was unbelievable.

“There are, of course, very few people who would consider doing such a thing,” Philip continued. “All it does is destroy the roof over their own head, and they risk being killed before luring any monsters in. However, there are records of such methods being used in the war between the Empire and the Alliance. There are many documents in Aker that detail House Maclaurin’s invasion of our lands.”

Philip spoke calmly, but his tone was slightly thorny. I’d heard of the great historical rift between the Alliance and House Maclaurin, and it was plainly evident in Philip’s behavior. At any rate, a different possibility came to mind.

“Kudou Riku...”

I muttered the name of the other monster tamer as I recalled his face. It would be easy for him to manipulate monsters into annihilating a village. He hated humanity’s very existence, so it was hard to deny the possibility. But even if it was him, revealing himself as a “savior” before the villagers was a little weird.

At any rate, it was best I kept this news of a fake savior in mind.

“Forgive my discourtesy,” Philip said, “but when I received your letter, this was the first thing that came to mind. I thought, ‘So a fake savior has appeared in our home as well.’”

“That makes sense. I’d suspect the same if I were in your position.”

All that considered, this meeting would have been a little more dangerous had Philip not been such a composed person. I had good luck.

“In your case, Takahiro, I believe you’ll be fine in this village and the neighboring ones, but if you ever leave on your own, please refrain from casually mentioning your circumstances. Things may get unpleasant. If you have business in Diospyro, then you need but send word and I will dispatch someone to get you.”

“Thank you very much.”

I had no intention of announcing myself as a savior to anyone, and I had no plans to go to Diospyro in the near future, but I gratefully accepted his consideration.

The next day, Philip left the village according to schedule. It was terrific fortune to have someone like him working with us. All that was left was to see if this luck would bring about the results we hoped for. Until things began moving in earnest, we did everything we could to prepare ourselves.

Chapter 6: The Skanda's Comrade in Arms ~Iino Yuna's POV~

Two weeks had passed since I started chasing rumors of the fake savior with the Second Company of the Holy Order. The company had been dispatched to this region to gather information. The knights went around finding out what they could, and their commander, Gordon Cavill, compiled it all before sending it to the First Company.

Gordon and his knights devoted all their energy to their duty. Sadly, they'd yet to get any results. They'd found several abandoned villages, but the all-important fake savior still eluded them.

If this was in fact the work of the Lord of Darkness, Kudou Riku, then it was essential to catch him in the act. We continued traveling from village to village, gathering information as we went. And then, one day...

"An invitation from a noble?" I asked, repeating what Gordon told me.

"Yes. A messenger from Viscount Bann came to us."

That was the name of the feudal lord here.

"He heard about you investigating the fake savior and insists on giving you a warm welcome," Gordon added.

"We came here to investigate, though..."

"I understand how you feel, but the viscount will lose face if he ignores a savior in his lands."

I grimaced, knowing he was right. To be honest, I didn't want to go, but I also wasn't going to disgrace a noble.

"Understood. Can you send a reply saying I accept?"

"Thank you, madam. I'm sure the viscount will be pleased."

Gordon's stern expression softened a little. By nature, he was like a wise old man. He had a large build and a bald head, so at a glance, he looked frightening and unrefined, but in truth, he was very considerate of others.

"Please leave things to us in your absence."

Just like that, I ended up having to visit a viscount.



Several days later, I took a day away from the Holy Order and visited the viscount's castle. It was nowhere near as grand as Fort Tilia

or Fort Ebenus. It was more of a small fortified building where the feudal lord and his clique could barricade themselves in and wait for rescue in case of emergencies. We'd already contacted them about my visit today, so they let me through right away.

"It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Miss Yuna."

Viscount Bann came out to greet me, bowing deeply. Two rows of what looked like his subordinates also bowed behind him. I'd informed him that I didn't want a grand show, but that had apparently fallen on deaf ears.

Or maybe this was actually a modest welcome. The town hadn't been stirred up into a festival, at least. Some on the exploration team would adore such treatment, but I didn't really like that kind of thing.

I found myself nearly grimacing, but I endured the urge. My eyes then stopped on someone lined up behind the viscount. He wasn't bowing. On the contrary, he raised his hand in a friendly manner.

"Huh...?"

"Yo, Iino. Long time no see."

He had a solid build and friendly features. My eyes shot open.

"Jinguuji?"

"Sup."

It was an unexpected reunion. The Dragon Jinguuji Tomoya, formerly of the exploration team, gave me an affable, masculine smile.



Jinguuji was known as the Dragon in the exploration team. He'd been part of the first expeditionary force, and he was one of the members who'd reached Fort Ebenus with me. However, when I returned from Fort Tilia with the students who'd been stranded in the Depths, Jinguuji had already left.

Around half the exploration team members had left during that time. I'd heard many of them were staying in this region. Jinguuji was the first I'd reunited with. He'd heard by coincidence that I was nearby and had secretly arranged for us to meet at Viscount Bann's castle. He'd kept this hidden because he'd been hoping to surprise me. I'd fallen for it completely, but I was honestly happy to see one of my old comrades.

After the party the viscount had prepared for me was over, I decided to drop by Jinguuji's room. The viscount had kept me occupied during the entire party, so Jinguuji and I hadn't had the time to sit and chat.

"Phew, we finally got some time to ourselves."

"Oh? You're getting me all hot and bothered, Iino."

"Don't be stupid. I didn't mean it like that," I said, taking a seat and glaring at Jinguuji. "I mean we can finally settle down and talk. It

was pretty hectic with people greeting me one after another like that.”

“You could’ve just nodded along and ignored them.”

Jinguuji laughed and threw himself back, taking a seat on the bed as I grumbled about the party. His face was red. He’d had a bit to drink, so he looked like he was in a good mood. Incidentally, reinforcing one’s physical abilities through mana didn’t just strengthen one’s muscles; it also increased one’s resistance to poisonous substances. This applied to alcohol too.

With enough mana, one could prevent instant death from powerful poisons, and with that extra time, the poison could be removed entirely with healing magic. At my level, poison was pretty much useless. In the same vein, I could also stop myself from getting drunk off alcohol. On the other hand, it was a choice—if I wanted, I could get drunk. I’d never had any alcohol before, though, so I only knew of this by hearsay.

“‘O savior, O great savior.’ The types begging for attention like that will be satisfied so long as you look in their general direction, and I get my fill of tasty stuff in return. It’s a win-win situation,” Jinguuji explained.

“I understand what you’re getting at, but...”

I didn’t like doing things like that. I preferred to interact with more serious and sincere people. I didn’t want to make things awkward, though, so I kept it to myself.

“I’m not good with that stuff,” I said, shrugging. “Honestly, it’s more tiring than fighting monsters.”

“For you, yeah. You kill monsters instantly. I bet you never even break a sweat.”

“That’s not really true. I have a hard time once in a while too.”

I recalled my fight against one of Majima’s servants, Gerbera. Known as the Great White Spider of the Depths, she was exceptionally strong. I’d managed to beat her in a direct confrontation, but any warrior-level cheater would struggle considerably against her. He had other strong servants like Lily, so if they worked together, they could probably even defeat a warrior. Actually, there was no “probably” about it; they’d defeated Juumonji back at Fort Tilia.

“Hmm. *You* having a hard time, huh?” Jinguuji said, his eyes sharpening a little.

Back in the Colony, he’d fought shoulder to shoulder with me on the front lines. He knew what I was capable of.

“I don’t think there’s anyone in this world strong enough to give you a run for your money,” he added.

“I’ve been running around all over. I got the chance to learn a lot.”

“Ouch. It’s not like I’ve just been playing around. Anyways...

Hmm, ‘a lot,’ huh? Oh, right. You went to Fort Tilia, yeah? Why’re you out here with a buncha knights?”

“A lot happened. What about you?”

“Nothing serious. Well, now’s as good a time as any. Let’s compare what we know. Honestly, I called you here ‘cause I have something I wanna ask you. Can you tell me what the others from the exploration team have been up to?”

“Yeah, sure.” I didn’t have a reason to refuse.

We went on to tell each other what we knew. From that, I found out that Jinguuji had received invitations from a bunch of nobles and had come here to see one of them, Viscount Bann. He’d already gone around to several other nobles too.

“There’re a few others out there like me. For the most part, they’ve been helping the provincial armies suppress monsters in exchange for their livelihood.”

“Does that go for you too?” I asked.

“More or less. I’ve gone out fighting a few times while leading some soldiers. Well, unlike the big nobles who have armies in the tens of thousands, the provincial armies out here are only a few hundred strong. So it wasn’t as though I were some great commander.”

“The noble territories in this area are pretty small, after all.”

“Seems like there’re others going around village to village without bothering any nobles. ‘We’re fighting to save those in need,’ so they say. They’re the ones with proper motives, unlike the happy-go-lucky idiots like me.”

“Is that so?”

This was an unexpected boon. I’d been wondering about those who’d quit the exploration team and scattered in this region. Not only did I get to meet Jinguuji, I’d even gotten information on some of the others.

“Do you maybe know where they are?” I asked.

“Hm? Uhhh, I guess so. Just a few, though...”

“Really?! Can you tell me where?!” I exclaimed, pitching forward.

“S-Sure. I don’t mind. Did something happen?” Jinguuji asked, somewhat bewildered by my vigor.

“Yeah. Have you heard the rumors of a fake savior?” I said, calming myself down a little.

“Yeah, I’ve heard people talking about it, at least.”

“That makes things easy, then. I actually came here to investigate the rumors.”

“Hmm. How whimsical. Well, I guess that suits you.”

“Don’t poke fun at me. I’m being serious. Because of these rumors spreading, we could get mistaken as fakes too. I thought it’d be nice to warn everyone.”

Jinguuji gave me an understanding nod, and I started telling him what I knew about my visit to Fort Tilia, my mission into the Depths, the circumstances behind Fort Tilia's fall, my scuffle and reconciliation with Majima, my return to the exploration team, and the details I'd discovered during my investigation on the fake savior.

"So that's the gist of it, huh? Got it," Jinguuji said calmly after I finished. He'd sobered up a little. "Just to check, you haven't met any of the quitters other than me yet, right?"

"Nope. I've covered quite a lot of ground too. The Empire's awfully big."

"Hmm..." He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully.

"That's why I'd like to know where they are," I added.

"Yeah, I'll tell you what I know, of course."

"Really? Thank you!"

"No need to thank me. We're comrades, right?" he added casually.

Jinguuji then told me where the others were. I pictured a map in my head and confirmed the location. Fortunately, Gordon's Second Company wasn't all that far from there now. At that distance, I could inform them of what I knew, then meet them there or go along with them too.

"I don't know if you'll be able to meet the others, though," Jinguuji said.

"Huh? Oh, I get it. They might be on the move."

That made sense. Both Jinguuji and I had been constantly moving. It wouldn't be strange if the students in that village were doing the same. It was highly likely they'd be gone already.

"In that case, I'll have to get going right away," I muttered to myself. "Maybe I should go ahead on my own? No, that might invite an unnecessary misunderstanding. It'll be safer to consult Gordon and go with them..."

"Hey, Iino?"

"Oh, sorry. What is it?"

His voice brought me back to my senses, but he didn't say anything.

"Jinguuji?"

Despite calling out to me, he remained silent with his eyes to the floor, seemingly deep in thought.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

After a short while, he raised his head. "Will you stay with me?"

"Huh?"

His proposal left me wide-eyed in shock. I'd thought it was some kind of perplexing joke, but Jinguuji looked dead serious.

"I don't mean it in a weird way," he said. "Well, I don't mind it that way either, but that's not what I mean. I want you to work with

me.”

“Can you explain?”

“To tell the truth, I haven’t just been lazing around. I...” He hesitated for a moment, then made up his mind. “I plan to somehow get back to our world. I want you to help me with that.”

“Go back...to our world?” I echoed, a chill running down my spine as I remembered Juumonji. “Jinguuji, did you...?”

“Oh. Don’t misunderstand. I’m different from Juumonji.”

I’d detailed the turmoil at Fort Tilia already, so Jinguuji knew what Juumonji had done and why.

“He was an idiot,” Jinguuji said. “Kill your friends to go back home? That’s goddamn crazy.”

I started, surprised by the anger in his voice.

“How many of us are left?” he continued. “A hundred? Two? How many of the original thousand are already dead? I’m different from that asshole. I’m getting back home with everyone.”

His strong will was practically tangible. To state the obvious, everyone who’d been teleported here had their own motives. Personal motivation had likely driven those who’d left the exploration team more so than those who’d chosen to act as a group. A certain someone who also had a strong will came to mind—though I hated him. Jinguuji acted independently, just like that guy did.

“What can you even do?” I asked hesitantly.

“I don’t know for sure. I know there’s no precedent. Still, I don’t think it’s impossible. We teleported from our world to this one, so it should be possible to go back. Even if his method was utter shit, there’s a certain persuasiveness to Juumonji’s logic too.”

We visitors were said to have the power to grant our own wishes. Juumonji had murdered his fellow visitors to “gain experience points” so that he could grant his wish of going home. Disregarding his methods, the idea of using our powers to cross the boundary between worlds had its merit. At the very least, Juumonji had considered it possible. In that case, maybe there were other ways, ones that didn’t require us to sacrifice one another. That was what Jinguuji believed.

“Also, the Holy Church is fishy,” Jinguuji added. “They hide the fact that our powers are based on our wishes from the public, right? They might be hiding other stuff too, like a way to go back, for example.”

Jinguuji appeared to be completely sober now.

“Anyways, I gotta gather intel,” he continued. “The capital’s probably the best place to find anything out, but if I go there before knowing left from right, it’ll be hard to judge if I’m being swindled. I’ve been going around so I can get the bare minimum of knowledge I need. Well, I might not be able to find out anything important, but if I

learn as much as I can before going there, it might point me toward something big, and I might be able to sense something's outta place if someone tries to trick me."

I could tell he'd given this a lot of thought, because he spoke fluently and without hesitation. I only just noticed how many books adorned his room. They were likely from Viscount Bann's personal collection. Jinguuji had mentioned going from noble to noble too. In other words, he had a good reason for his wandering.

"I've already called out a few trustworthy people," he said. "There aren't all that many of us, but we're treated as saviors in this world. If we act smart, we should be able to find the information we need. Iino, it'd be reassuring to have you with us."

"Jinguuji..."

"Can you?"

I hesitated for a moment. He looked so sincere. But, in the end, I shook my head.

"Iino..."

"Sorry. There's something I have to do first."

His proposal was definitely attractive. I also hoped that we could all go home. However, I couldn't leave wicked deeds at large after learning of them. Nobody would die as a direct consequence of our going back home, but if we left the fake savior at large, more casualties were sure to come. It was easy for me to decide what to prioritize.

"I see..." Jinguuji said, sighing deeply before grinning. "Aw man, I got turned down."

"Sorry."

"Oh well. Everyone's got something important to them," he said casually, spurring on my guilt even more. "C'mon, don't look at me like that."

"Sorry, Jinguuji."

"It's fine. Oh, but..."

"It's a secret, right? I know."

Seeing as he suspected the Holy Church, it was better not to publicize what he was up to.

"Thanks," he said with a relieved smile, then averted his gaze bashfully. "Well, ya know, if I find a way back, I'll tell you. So don't worry."

"Thank you." I giggled. He acted irresponsible every now and then, but he always kept his friends close at heart. "Jinguuji, you're a good guy."

"I feel kinda disappointed hearing that from a girl, but thanks."

"Huh?"

"You just don't get it. That's why Watanabe got stuck spinning his

wheels,” Jinguuji said, smiling wryly. “But I guess that makes sense.” His smile then turned to a teasing one. I had a bad feeling. “You’ve got the hots for someone else and all. I mean, you turned me down too. Man, I’m jealous.”

“Huh?” I scowled, having no idea what he was implying.

“Oh come on. I’m talking about Majima,” he said with a lewd grin. “You like him, don’t you?”

“What?” I froze. It took a few seconds for his words to sink in, at which point I felt heat rushing to my face. “Wh-Wh-What are you saying?! You’re wrong! How did you come to that conclusion?!”

“I mean, you’re clearly different when you talk about him,” he answered, his expression puzzled. “You really haven’t noticed?”

I could feel even more heat in my cheeks, but it was because of anger. How could I not be angry over such an outrageous misunderstanding? That was obviously all there was to it.

“You’re wrong! I hate that guy!”

I *had* discussed Majima while detailing what had happened. I’d also explained things so that Jinguuji knew for sure that Majima was utterly unrelated to the attack on Fort Tilia, but...but...that was only to right a wrong. That was all. Nothing else.

“Well, I mean, I guess I’m conscious of him. I mean, I hate him and all.”

“Hmmmm.”

“What’s with that face?”

“Nothing. I mean, I don’t really get what you see in the guy, but isn’t it fine? Love isn’t logical.”

“I do *not* like—!”

There was no point; I wasn’t getting through to him. He was just poking fun at me now. I was considering giving him a good whack if he said anything else weird, when suddenly, Jinguuji’s expression turned serious.

“Hey, lino?”

“What?” I replied thornily.

“Things might get crazy from here on out,” he said, dead serious. “Don’t give in.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Well...it’s just a hunch,” Jinguuji answered with a vague smile. “Even if we’ve got special powers, this world is still dangerous. You’re a girl too, so of course I’ll worry.”

“Nobody can beat me in a one-on-one fight. I should be the one worried about you.”

“Hah, the mouth on you,” Jinguuji said, smiling bitterly.

I could tell that he was seriously worried about me. I was very grateful.

“Jinguuji, be careful out there.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

The next day, I informed Jinguuji that I was leaving and returned to Gordon and his knights. The day after that, I made my way toward the village Jinguuji had told me about, planning to warn the students staying there of the fake savior.

Chapter 7: The Second Sister's Path to Love ~Lily's POV~

The village was currently short on hands. It was small, but it couldn't be maintained with only about a dozen adults. We'd all racked our brains trying to figure out what to do about it, and a few days back, a solution had presented itself.

Melvin, the neighboring village's chief, had sent people over to help. He did so because Philip had promised my master he'd send aid, so we were now actively moving toward restoring the village. There were, however, a few concerns.

We weren't hiding our circumstances here. Even though this was bound to happen sooner or later, people coming from the outside posed a risk. That said, Melvin had apparently helped us out in this regard. The elves he'd sent hadn't looked at Gerbera or Lobivia with disgust in their eyes.

Melvin had given them very detailed instructions, and his wife, Leah, had taken the initiative to be very friendly with us monsters. Moreover, the elves were all familiar faces who'd either worked with us suppressing the azure hares or crossed blades with my master during that series of mock battles. I could tell that Melvin had put thought into who he'd sent. From the looks of it, there weren't going to be any problems.

Leah took charge and tasked the newcomers to care for the fields that we hadn't been able to get around to. There still weren't enough hands to go around, though, so we remained responsible for protecting the village.

There weren't all that many of us for the job. Fortunately, several people, like my master and Shiran, could detect enemies over a wide range, so we were fairly certain we could keep the villagers safe. Still, it was questionable whether we could protect all of the village's facilities.

Considering the village's future, it was best to avoid as much damage as possible, so we took precautionary measures before any monster attacks could happen. To be more specific, we suppressed the monsters in the region. That was the reason I found myself walking through the forest now.

I mimicked a wolf's sense of smell and remained vigilant of my surroundings. My master walked behind me. It didn't stand out much

in this gloomy forest, but he had his perception magic, the Misty Lodge, deployed. It could cover a wide area, and depending on factors like the direction of the wind, it could sense abnormalities beyond what my nose was capable of.

Taking into consideration the balance of our forces in and out of the village, we'd brought Lobivia with us too, so there was no need to worry if it came to battle. What's more, Salvia was out today as well.

"You've gotten rather accustomed to this magic, my dear," she said happily, floating casually above our master's shoulder. She almost looked like a balloon being tugged along by a string.

"Well, I guess I can now make it last pretty long," he replied.

"That's proof that you've grown adept at it and have cut out the waste," Salvia said. "I didn't think you'd master it so quickly. You're gifted."

"I'm pretty sure it's more that we have good compatibility."

He didn't sound like he was being humble; he truly believed this. As a matter of fact, he didn't have much aptitude for magic. Actually, disregarding my personal feelings, he was a mediocre fighter. He wasn't lacking in talent completely, but there was nothing worth noting either. Talent wasn't the reason he got used to handling mana relatively quickly. His experiences surviving several life-threatening situations had likely played a far larger role.

For example, he'd quickly learned how to handle mana only because Gerbera had supplied him with mana after he'd nearly gotten killed by blowfoxes and bullet creepers. Also, his current trump card, manifesting the Great White Spider's strength, had awakened in the midst of battle against the Mad Beast, much like how people could somehow summon a primal strength when faced with a dire emergency. That awakening even came with the risk of losing his memories of his world.

The reason he could fight at all to begin with was because of his regular training regimen. It was so severe that anyone who didn't know of his circumstances would think he was absolutely insane. Anyone would be able to fight after going through that kind of training. It was a different matter whether they could withstand the training itself, though.

Our master gritted his teeth and tried his best for our sakes. Nobody could replicate this feat. The accumulation of his effort was exactly what had allowed him to fight alongside Asarina and to acquire Salvia's magic. Even so, none of that canceled out his mediocre talent. All that considered, his mastery of the Misty Lodge was outstanding.

"Tee hee hee. Excellent compatibility, huh?" Salvia said with a giggle. "You might be right, my dear. It's so very comfortable inside

you, isn't it, Asarina?"

"Ssster," Asarina purred in agreement, oscillating about in the air.

"How nice. I wanna try being inside our master too," I said.

"What the hell are you saying?" he replied, looking troubled.

"Aww. I mean, I'm curious what it feels like. Right, Lobivia?"

"Huh?! I-I don't really..."

Lobivia looked a little shaken. Maybe she was actually thinking the same thing as me.

"Well, no matter how good our compatibility is, I'm just about at my limit," our master said, smiling bitterly.

Nearly an hour had passed since we started our patrol. He'd gotten better at deploying the Misty Lodge efficiently, but keeping it up for such a long time still exhausted his mana supply.

"Well, it's as good a time as any to head back," I said.

We'd encountered and defeated several monsters. Our patrol had gone great, so we decided to return.

Just as we turned toward the village, Lobivia tugged on our master's sleeve. "Hey, Takahiro. I know you don't got no more mana, but how's your stamina? You're all spindly, so say so right away if something's up."

I couldn't even keep count of how many times she'd asked that question today. From a dragon's perspective, the human body was ever so frail. Lobivia was curt and blunt, but she spoke out of genuine concern. She was surprisingly a bit of a worrywart.

"I'm fine," our master replied with a smile. "Some blood sprayed on me, though. I'd like to wash it off," he added, grimacing.

He'd fought some monsters today to get some practical training in. The battles had all gone safely, but a fair amount of blood had gotten on him. He'd wiped it off, but the stench remained, and the crusty feeling on his clothes must've felt gross.

"You got what you asked for. I could've done them in with a single bite," Lobivia said.

"Thanks for letting me have a go at it," our master replied.

"Whatever. I didn't do nothing."

"That's not true. We have to be careful so that things don't go south, just in case. That's why I asked you to come along. You're a big help."

"Hmph..."

Lobivia scoffed as she pulled on our master's sleeve again and pushed her head against his arm. It was hard to tell whether she was attached to him or repulsed by him, but this was just her way of hiding her embarrassment. In all likelihood, she was pouting about how she had nothing to do despite being asked to come along. She wanted him to pay attention to her and cheer her up.

“Oh yeah, Master,” I said, recalling something because of her childish behavior. “You’ve been taking care of the village kids every now and then, right? How’s that going?”

“Hm? Pretty well. They’re all good kids,” he answered, turning his attention away from Lobivia. “Why don’t you come along next time? Gerbera joined in recently too.”

“Hmmm. Well, the people in serious condition are starting to stabilize, so maybe I should. Oh, you wanna come too, Lobivia?”

“M-Me?” Lobivia yelled with a start, not expecting the conversation to turn to her. “I-I’m fine. I don’t wanna.”

She shook her head, and her red hair swayed about. She made a face as if I’d said something outrageous. Her reaction was just so cute.

“Aww, come on,” I said, giggling. “They’re all little kids, so you’d be their big sister.”

“B-Big sister...?”

Lobivia blushed. As the youngest sibling among the dragons, that thought tugged at her heartstrings a little.



“Me...a big sister?”

“That’s right. Doesn’t that sound nice, Master?”

I just needed to give her one more little push, but I didn’t get the response from our master that I was expecting.

“What’s the matter, Master?” I asked, cocking my head.

“Huh? Oh. Sorry, it’s nothing,” he said after a pause.

“Hmmm?”

He seemed to be deep in thought. It had me a little curious.

“What did you ask again?” he said.

“Oh, right.” I decided to leave my questions for later and got back on track. “Come on. We were talking about going with you to see the kids. I was thinking Lobivia should come too.”

“Aah. That sounds good.”

“Right? Oh. But maybe we shouldn’t impose on them with too many people at once. There’s me and Lobivia, and Katou, who’s been taking care of them to begin with. Then we need you to come along with us, and Rose too, right?”

“Well, you’ve got a point there,” he said, sounding like he wasn’t all that into the conversation and averting his gaze. This reaction caught my attention.

“Hey, Master?” I said, staring at his face. “Did something happen with Rose?”

“Not really...”

So he claimed, but he wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“Hmmm?”

I cocked my head again, but then Lobivia pulled on our master’s hand.

“Hey, Takahiro. If I play with these kids, you’ll be there too, yeah?”

To her, this was worth more attention than our master’s strange reaction.

“Yeah. I’ll only show up once in a while, though,” he said, looking relieved. “I can match my time with yours if you’re going. You want to?”

“I-If I just hafta watch.”

“What’s with that response?”

Lobivia, acting shy, shook our master’s shoulders, and the two of them carried on with their conversation. Meanwhile, I slowed my pace a little. I met Salvia’s eyes and beckoned her over.

“So how’s it actually going for Rose?” I asked quietly.

Salvia usually stayed cooped up to preserve her mana, but she came out once every few days. I hadn’t had a chance to see Rose and our master play with the children, but I figured that Salvia had.

“Right,” Salvia started with a bemused smile. “Lately, it looks like our master is a little conscious of her.”

“I see.”

His reaction made sense now. I didn’t know the full details, but Katou was probably responsible for this change, seeing as how she fully supported Rose. My master’s somewhat-strange reaction was seemingly because her strategy was slowly bearing fruit.

After coming to that conclusion, I knitted my brow a little.

“Is that all?” I asked.

“So far,” Salvia answered.

“Hmm.”

In other words, my cute little sister’s love was progressing, but not yet to a definitive degree. I pursed my lips. Honestly, it was so slow it was vexing. Even if I’d been there a few days before her, Rose had been by our master’s side from the very beginning. She’d supported our master with me through his most painful moments. To be frank, for a long time now, the trust and affection he had for her had been no different from the trust and affection he had for me.

As proof of that, one only had to look back over what had transpired to this day. Rose had gone from a cut-and-dried wooden puppet to a cute, girly doll. Every time she changed little by little, our master would always be shaken. With Katou’s help, Rose had been on the romantic offensive, where pretty much every strike had scored a critical hit. She was simply that special to our master.

The reason things had yet to progress into actual romance was likely because Rose had no confidence in her own feelings. She didn’t know whether she was in love with our master. She had a vague notion that it was possible, but she didn’t have the confidence to believe it. That pretty much summed things up, in my opinion.

Rose was such an honest girl, so it was understandable that she’d struggled to convey her love for our master. He wasn’t faultless in this either. He was still influenced by his old world in some ways, so he was putting the brakes on his own feelings. As a result, even though their hearts throbbed for each other, they couldn’t convey their love.

“Aah, it’s so frustrating. She could just, like, do it, and it’d be fine.”

“Oh my, that seems to come from experience,” Salvia said, covering her mouth, her cheeks slightly flushed. “Well, I do understand how you feel. Everyone has their own pace. You watch over her and wait because you know this, right?”

“I do, but ya know...”

I wanted to respect both of them as much as possible. Katou probably felt the same. If not, she would’ve moved things along far more efficiently. She was exceptionally clever, after all.

It was frustrating to sit back and watch, but the hands of time kept moving forward. The day was sure to come. And as Rose slowly progressed, would she find conviction in her own feelings first? Or would the brakes on our master's heart stop working before that? I stared at his back as he walked on, looking forward to the day either happened.

Chapter 8: Twilight

Sudden events had a tendency to make one think, “Is this really what I think it is?” Lately, those days had come and gone.

“Okay then, everyone, let’s try starting from here today,” Lily said cheerfully.

She was holding a piece of paper with large, easy-to-read letters written on it. Her eyes were fixed on the young children sitting around the table with her. Once she confirmed they were seated, she gave them a sweet smile.

“All righty. Watch closely now; I’m gonna start!”

This all came about because of a picture book. Lily had bought it in town some time ago to learn how to read. She’d pulled it out to read to the children when one of the older kids had shown an interest in reading too. That was how these classes had started.

In this world, where entertainment was hard to come by, maybe this was a curious form of play. Several of the children practiced passionately, giving it their all. Of course, some were cut out for it, and some weren’t. That had nothing to do with being a child either.

“Oh, Rose. You’ve got it wrong there,” Lily said to her little sister.

“D-Do I?”

Rose was participating in the classes too. She’d apparently been considering learning to read for a while now.

“Umm, sister, how is this wrong?”

“Over here. The shape is different, see?”

Rose stared at what she’d written. She had beautiful handwriting due to her dexterous fingers, but she had no familiarity with the letters themselves, so it was taking her some time to learn.

“Looks difficult,” Gerbera said, watching from a short distance.

Incidentally, she hadn’t participated in any of these classes. Instead, she watched over the youngest children.

“Not only must you memorize all these so-called letters, but you then have to combine them to derive any sort of meaning, right? Seriously, I’m surprised such a complicated system could be accomplished.”

“Acwompished!”

The girl in Gerbera’s arms imitated her. She was actually one of the children who’d burst into tears upon seeing Gerbera for the first time. Perhaps she’d gotten attached to Gerbera so quickly because

Gerbera's innocent personality resonated well with children.

Rose smiled at the girl, then turned my way. "I'm impressed that my sister learned to read and write so quickly. As a fellow monster, I truly admire her."

"This kind of thing is greatly influenced by how much interest you have in it," I said.

Interest was the greatest factor in acquiring knowledge. In the end, there was no better way to increase one's ability to learn than to make it fun.

"You're both monsters, but in Lily's case, she's influenced by Mizushima. They say a separate personality can have an effect on someone's hobbies."

"Interest, is it?" Rose looked up for a bit, deep in thought. "In that case, there is something I'd like you to teach me." She looked back down at me, a smile as beautiful as a flower on her lips. "How is your name written using this world's letters, Master?"

"O-Oh, my name? Sure," I said one beat later, thrown off by the unexpected request. "Is this okay?"

"Yes. Oh, forgive me. Could I also ask you to write it using your world's letters?"

I did as she asked and wrote my name again on the same piece of paper.

"Thank you very much. So this is your... Ah, you're right. I think I'll be able to remember this."

Rose held the paper with my name written on it in two languages close to her chest and smiled happily. Her smile was dazzling. For some reason, I couldn't keep watching and instead averted my eyes. In my peripheral vision, I could see that Rose was acting a little curiously.

"Ooh. So that is our lord's name?" Gerbera said. "Can you show me too?"

"Gerbera? Yes, of course," Rose replied.

The two of them started talking, and I felt a little relieved. Noticing my behavior, I scratched my cheek. A feeling gripped my heart for the umpteenth time now.

Is this really what I think it is...?



With my daily training over, I washed off my sweat. After that, I stepped outside to get some fresh air. A beautiful orange painted the sky, and I could see half of the setting sun.

"Oh, My Lord."

Gerbera happened to come my way, her snow-white body dyed by the sunset.

"It's about time for dinner. Where are you going?" she asked.

"Nowhere in particular. I just came out for some air. What about you?"

"I just finished standing guard over the village. I traded places with Shiran and was on my way back."

"I see. Good work out there."

"Mm."

Gerbera came closer and stretched out her hand.

"What?" I asked.

She touched my head, but she wasn't petting me. She was patting me all over like a child with a toy.

"You're all wet," she said.

"I took a bath."

It sounded luxurious when I put it like that, but I'd simply used a tub of water and one of Rose's imitation runestones. We'd offered one to the village, which had delighted them greatly.

"Hrm. I see. A bath," Gerbera said, pursing her lips. "I should've returned a little earlier then."

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said," Gerbera answered, her legs skittering about. "I would've liked your help washing my body, My Lord."

"Uhh... Washing your body is a lot of work, just so you know," I said, narrowing my eyes.

Her spider half didn't sweat, so she only needed to wipe off the upper half of her body. However, she did accumulate dirt little by little, so she had to bathe once in a while. Her lower body was relatively large compared to a human's, and it was covered in long hair. Bathing her was somewhat like washing a big dog, just several times harder. Counting the time it took to dry her off, it required more than an hour.

"If the bottom is too much trouble, I'm fine with just the top."

"There's not much point in me helping you wash your upper body..."

"There is. It makes me happy." Gerbera giggled and flashed me a grin. "Does it not make you happy, My Lord?"

"No comment."

"How reserved you are."

As we talked, her hands went from my head to my cheeks, then she suddenly pulled back.

"Hrm?"

Gerbera turned her head toward two villagers who were passing by.

"Oh! Mister Takahiro!"

"Thank you for all you've done, sir. I really appreciate you

accompanying us on our training earlier.”

One was a resident of Kehdo, while the other was one of the elves dispatched from Rapha. The two of them were carrying a large wooden box together.

“And Miss Gerbera, thank you for standing guard over the village.”

They even talked to Gerbera, showing no particular fear.

“Mm.” She nodded back to them in a collected manner.

“Good work today. What’s that you’re carrying?” I asked.

“Supplies from Rapha!” the elf from Kehdo answered energetically. “They just arrived, so we’re carrying them in!”

“Aah...”

During our recent meeting, Philip had promised to provide aid. Rapha had lent what was required immediately, and we planned to reimburse them once Philip’s support arrived.

“Huh? I’m pretty sure Kei was documenting the list of goods borrowed from Rapha. Is she already done? That was fast.”

“Oh. No. Not yet. It’s gotten dark out, so we’re carrying in what’s already been recorded.”

“Is that so? Thanks for your hard work. Is there something I can help with?”

“Huh? No! Not at all! We can’t possibly ask you to help!”

The elf from Kehdo shook his head as though this was utterly out of the question. He did so vigorously enough that both of them lost their balance.

“Wh-Whoa?!”

They panicked, and I immediately moved to help, but Gerbera was faster.

“That’s dangerous. Be careful.”

She stretched out one of her long legs and skillfully stopped the box from toppling over, during which time the two elves regained their balance.

“Th-Thank you very much.”

“Good grief, calm down a little,” the other elf said in exasperation. “Thank you, Miss Gerbera. Mister Takahiro, forgive our unsightly display.”

He was both friendly and respectful, though not to the exaggerated degree his partner was.

“Then, if you’ll please excuse us.”

The two elves walked off, being a bit more careful with the box this time.

“Hmph, how strange,” Gerbera said, watching them go. “To think I would spend such a normal life inside a human settlement. I never thought the day would come.”

“Yeah. It’s a little weird to me too.”

Gerbera had stayed out of sight from the very moment we stepped into the human world. We’d all been very careful to keep her from being discovered. I was happy that they so readily accepted her, but it also felt a little odd.

“However, I’m sure this will one day become the norm,” Gerbera said with conviction, turning my way. “No, we shall strive to make it the norm, right?”

“Yeah.”

I returned her smile. Gerbera then suddenly shifted her focus to behind me. I could hear the door opening to my back. I turned around and met Rose’s eyes as she pushed it open.

“Ah...”

Rose made a quiet sound. For no reason whatsoever, my heart throbbed, and I lost my opportunity to say anything. Rose froze, the door still only half-open.

Seeing us like this, Gerbera blinked in confusion. “Hrm?” Her red eyes shifted between me and Rose. “Hmm. Now then, I should be going back already. You’re staying out here, right, My Lord?”

Gerbera gave me a nod and quickly entered the house, switching places with Rose.

“Gerbera...” I muttered.

“Later then. Come back before dinner.”

The door closed with a clack, and the two of us were left outside. I immediately knew that Gerbera was trying to be considerate. Rose and I exchanged glances and, immediately feeling restless, averted our eyes shortly after.

“Uhh... What’s up, Rose?”

“Oh, I thought... No, I just wanted to take a walk.”

“A walk?”

“Yes.”

It was a very clumsy exchange. How had things ended up like this? Thinking back on it, there hadn’t been any obvious cause. I’d gotten to spend a lot of time with Rose while we stayed in this village, and before I knew it, they’d become like this. We were fine when other people were around, but when alone, things ended up being really awkward for some reason.

It was weird. Up until now, I’d always felt calm and at peace whenever I was with Rose. It was as if something had been imprinted on me. During our time in the Woodlands, when we had no idea whether we’d be alive the next day, Rose had said that she would protect me. Her devotion had saved me to a great extent.

For example, there was that one night I’d slept with Rose in my arms. The calm it brought me had made me forget everything that had

been plaguing me. Just being with her had given me peace of mind.

Even now, that was no different, but that wasn't all anymore. From the day I met her, Rose had changed with the flow of time. She'd become a girl. She'd become sweet, lovable, and earnest. At some point, I'd started to think, "Huh?"

There was something about her gaze, or maybe her behavior. Somehow or other, something was getting across to me. Unlike Lily or Gerbera, Rose hadn't said anything. Even if I guessed based on her behavior, Rose was always very affectionate with me, so it was actually hard to read the minute changes in how she displayed her affection.

What I knew for certain was that when I looked at Rose, I was conscious of her being a girl. When she was with me, my heart throbbed. What was this feeling? Once that question came to mind, there was only one answer.

But I had to hit the brakes. My sensibilities from my world were getting in the way, but that wasn't all. If it were, then things would be fine, but there was one other big reason for my hesitancy.

It had to do with my relationship with Rose up until now. She was fiercely loyal, and she felt joy from being of service. Say I wanted that kind of relationship with her. She would surely accept. She would do so even if she felt no such emotions herself.

That would be no good, so I hesitated to take the next step. In a sense, the precious master-servant relationship we'd maintained was getting in the way. As a result, Rose had definitely noticed the awkward atmosphere between us.

"Um... Master. Have I done something wrong?" she asked anxiously, her gloved hands tightly gripping her apron.

"You haven't." I shook my head. Even if I couldn't convey my feelings, there was something I had to get across to her. "You've got the wrong idea, Rose. The problem is with me... I mean, I can't really explain it, but I'm not displeased or anything."

I paused, but thinking it wasn't enough, I continued.

"I'm happy whenever I'm with you, Rose."

"Master..."

Her eyes widened. I felt embarrassed, but I made sure not to look away.

"Is that true?" she asked.

"Yeah, it is," I declared with ease.

"I...see. Thank goodness."

She looked relieved from the bottom of her heart. Her expression immediately turned cheerful, as if the clouds in the sky had disappeared in an instant. Even this small thing shook my heart. It was clear to me now. I couldn't help but smile bitterly at how dense

I'd been.

"You came out for a walk, right?" I said. "There's still time until dinner, so shall we?"

"Yes, Master."

I started walking, and Rose followed half a step behind. Her footsteps were light, and her lips formed a smile. We continued talking, and it started getting dark. The setting sun vanished, and the sky blackened as if covered in ink. The dimly lit village was smeared in darkness—and an ogre stood beneath a light in our path.

"Huh?"

There was something supernatural about twilight. When the sun set and day turned to night, people encountered monsters. This monster had black skin, as if the darkness had seeped into its very being, and ominous red hair. It wore a fiendish smile as if it were going to bite the head off anyone it met. Its mere presence emanated intense bloodlust and animosity.

"Yooo, Majima. I came to pay you back."

The knight of the Holy Order, Battle Ogre Edgar Guivarch, stood before us.



Chapter 9: A Single Tenacious Thrust

The bloodlust emanating from this man was so strong it felt as though a physical force were pressing down on me. I was sure the enemy before me was the Battle Ogre, but that only made things more confusing. Why was Edgar here? We had a security net around the village. Shiran's spirit should've detected him before he managed to slip this far in. So why?

"Takahiro!"

I heard a desperate cry. I could see a figure far behind Edgar; it was Lobivia. She staggered toward us, her arm limply dangling from its socket. She had obviously broken a bone, meaning she'd encountered Edgar before he'd gotten here.

"Run, Takahiro!" Lobivia screamed.

I still didn't fully grasp what was going on, but one thing was perfectly clear. This ogre was here to kill me.

"Here I come," Edgar declared, kicking off the ground.

There was no time for me to run away.

"Step back, Master!" Sounding desperate, Rose pulled a battle-ax from her apron pocket and stepped forth.

I knew full well that Rose couldn't stop the Battle Ogre on her own. This man had inherited the power of a visitor—the power of a savior from the past who'd played a part in keeping peace in this world. Among my servants, no one aside from Lily, Gerbera, and Shiran could stop a single swing of his greatsword.

"You shan't have your way, ogre!"

A door blew off its hinges as the Great White Spider barged into the fray. She'd either heard Lobivia's screaming or sensed the Battle Ogre's bloodlust. She hadn't figured out what was going on, but she'd decided to charge out anyway. Because of this, she managed to land a surprise attack on him.

"Shyaaah!" Her leg thrust out like a spear, aiming for the ogre's heart.

Even with the element of surprise, Edgar could fend it off with his monstrous strength. It wouldn't be enough to kill him, but it would be enough to stall him. Lily was inside the house, so she was sure to come flying out at any moment. Shiran was working elsewhere in the village. I could bet that she was running toward us. So long as we could buy time, that was more than enough.

However, my read of the situation proved incorrect. Edgar didn't slow down at all.

"Wha—?!" Gerbera shrieked.

Edgar had blocked her attack with his left arm. More accurately, he hadn't really blocked it; he'd thrust his palm out at it. Gerbera's leg pierced through his hand all the way up to his elbow. It tore through his muscles and broke his bones—a spectacle that made me want to shut my eyes. Nonetheless, he'd stopped her strike from reaching his heart, and he still had his weapon ready to use.

"What a madman!"

Gerbera was thrown off by the unexpected move and readied herself for a counterattack, but that wasn't the end to Edgar's unexpected behavior. He clenched his blood-soaked hand and grabbed Gerbera's leg as if he felt no pain.

"Outta the way!"

"Wha—?!"

Having leaped to deliver her thrust, Gerbera's legs weren't on the ground. Edgar flung her aside, sending her tumbling through the air. Of course, Gerbera easily corrected her posture in midair and readied herself for another attack.

Edgar's left arm was a mangled mess because of his reckless actions. He'd only delayed the inevitable with this sacrifice—a mistake on his part. At least, that would have been the case if he were fighting Gerbera, but she wasn't his target. The ogre's eyes remained focused only on me.

Something muddy lurked deep within his pupils. I hadn't sensed it in my last encounter with him—not in that man who only prioritized having fun in battle, who didn't care about anything else, and who laid bare his fighting spirit for all to see. The sight sent chills down my spine. He looked insane.

Thinking back on it, Shiran had defeated Edgar without any help. Despite this, he'd forced his way into the village all on his own when all of my servants were here. He wouldn't do that unless his resolve was inconceivably stronger than when we'd last met. What had stirred him to take action?

The ogre kept advancing, paying no heed to his injuries, blood pouring from his left arm as he roared.

"Raaah!"

"Stop right there!" Rose yelled, putting her entire soul behind her axe.

"Like hell I'll let you!" Gerbera joined in, still in midair. Refusing to give up, she sent her spider threads soaring.

"Guh..."

A pained grunt escaped my lips, and red blood trickled to the

ground.



A moment before that happened, Lily came rushing out of the house.

“Master?! That’s...Edgar?!” Confronted by the situation before her eyes, Lily thrust her spear with an expression of fury. “Get away!”

Edgar fended off the attack and stepped to the side as Lily charged in.

“Master! Are you okay?!” she yelled back my way, still thrusting her spear at her enemy.

“Yeah...” I replied with a deep groan.

In that instant, several things happened at once. First, Gerbera’s threads splendidly caught Edgar’s greatsword. It didn’t do anything to slow him down, though. Edgar let go of his weapon without giving it a second thought and instead drew a shortsword from his back. Still, depriving him of his primary weapon was a big deal. A shortsword couldn’t compare to Rose’s handcrafted battle-ax.

“Haaah!”

Rose let out a cry, prepared to protect me with a do-or-die spirit. Having lost an arm and reduced to using a shortsword, not even the Battle Ogre could deliver a proper blow without risking his own life. Although, if there was one miscalculation we’d made, it was thinking that Edgar had some shred of self-preservation. Much like with Gerbera, Edgar practically ignored Rose’s attack.

“Ugh!”

He swayed just slightly to dodge, and the axe’s blade bit into his right shoulder down to his flank. The wound was deep enough to reach his organs, but the ogre still didn’t stop.

“Raaah!”

His shortsword tore through the air as if it only had one target in sight—a single tenacious thrust, quite literally ignoring everything else. I tried to draw my sword to block it, but it was next to impossible to make it in time against an unexpected attack backed by my enemy’s entire weight. Thanks to Rose, however, the blade didn’t deliver a fatal wound.

“Are you all right, Rose?” I asked.

“Yes, Master...” she answered, standing back up after tumbling a short distance away.

She moved awkwardly, but there was no helping that. The instant they’d clashed, Edgar had rammed his way right through her.

“You’re fucking crazy...” Edgar muttered, dumbfounded by her behavior.

Even he’d found her determination unexpected. Rose had been

blown away as if she'd collided with a truck. It was a wonder her body hadn't shattered to pieces.

"My body is my master's shield."

Her broken left arm popped out of its socket and fell to the ground, but she maintained her grip on her axe with her right hand.

"I won't let you kill him."

She was being reckless, but thanks to that, I'd narrowly escaped death. Edgar's shortsword had found its way into my left bicep, but that wasn't enough to—

"Guh..."

A pained grunt escaped my lips.

"M-Master?!" Sensing something was amiss, Lily fell back to my side while keeping an eye on Edgar. "What's wrong?"

"Poison..." I replied briefly.

Lily's eyes shot open. "That sword?!"

"Yeah..."

I started to feel a strange heat from my wound, and my body gradually got heavier.

"I'm fine. I can keep it down," I said with a shake of my head.

The mana reinforcing my body suppressed the poison. Even if I was nothing compared to the other cheaters, especially those who far surpassed the warriors, I'd leveled up my ability to reinforce my body a fair bit. This was nothing; I could even fight. Having said that, I had no reason to force myself to do so.

"I'll heal you right away. Gerbera, protect us!"

"On it."

Gerbera came our way. Lily remained posed for combat as a glowing white glyph took shape in her hand. Edgar observantly watched us. A significant puddle of blood was pooled at his feet. He was calmer than I thought he'd be. Judging by his behavior up until now, I figured he'd keep ignoring his wounds and press the attack.

And then Edgar quickly backed off and turned on his heel—showing his back to his enemy. His figure quickly vanished into the darkness.

"He ran away?" I murmured.

He'd failed in his assassination attempt and had made his escape like a good sport.

"Gerbera, go after—"

"I can't possibly leave you behind in this situation, My Lord," she refused outright. "You're not the only one injured either."

Now that our enemy was gone, Rose collapsed to her knees, and Lobivia reached us, her steps unsteady.

"He was targeting you specifically, My Lord," Gerbera continued. "We must prioritize your safety above all else."

When it came to battle, the Great White Spider's judgment was sound. She had a point. It was risky for Lily to perform the roles of both a healer and a guard.

"You're right," I said, giving up my pursuit. "Thanks, everyone. You really saved me."

I never thought the Battle Ogre would launch a solo attack on us. I had no idea how he'd managed to slip by our security net. At any rate, things had gotten pretty dangerous.

"I'm worried about the villagers, though," I said.

"They're fine. Shiran is giving chase as we speak."

Right as Lily said that, a magic explosion rang out from far away. I could feel Shiran's presence through the mental path. She was already on the move.

"I doubt even Edgar can take Shiran on in his current state. He shouldn't have the time to mess with any of the villagers."

Lily was right. Edgar's sacrificial attack had been terrifying, but it had only been possible because he'd put his entire soul into that one thrust. The feat wasn't repeatable. What's more, we'd taken damage from the attack, but he'd suffered from it far more. Gerbera had crushed his left arm. Rose's axe had severely wounded him all the way down to his organs. Healing magic was powerful, but it wasn't omnipotent. I wasn't aware of how fast the Holy Order's Battle Ogre could recover naturally, but a wrong move could endanger his life. Even if he survived, his wounds were so severe that there would be aftereffects.

I was worried about the village, but now that Shiran was at his heels, Edgar couldn't focus on anything else. Also, there were no signs of other enemies attacking from elsewhere. We couldn't let our guard down, but it was safe to assume that we were past the worst of it.

"More importantly, Master, worry about your own health," Lily said, a tinge of anger in her voice. "I'm using healing magic, but there's nothing better than some proper rest. Just believe in Shiran for now and keep still."

"I know..."

I did feel somewhat despondent because of the poison, so it was better to obediently listen to her right now.

"Oh, Lobivia, you're injured too, right? How're you holding up?" I asked.

"This'll heal on its own," she replied, even as her broken arm dangled about. "Just be quiet and take a damn seat, moron."

I couldn't really argue with everyone telling me to be still. I did as I was told and sat down.

"Master, please forgive me," Rose said. "You suffered that wound only because of my inadequacy."

She walked closer to me as she apologized, each step accompanied by creaking wood.

“What, this? Don’t worry about it,” I told her.

“But...”

Rose’s expression was dark. Her eyes were focused on my wound.

“You have it way worse than I do,” I said, smiling bitterly.

“The damage I suffered is in fact great, but I can simply swap out my parts. You are made of flesh and blood, Master. Your body is very precious too. We cannot be compared.”

“Your body is very precious to me, Rose.”

So I said, but it didn’t seem to get across to her. She was clearly depressed. She was probably thinking that Gerbera or Lily would’ve managed to protect me somehow. Lily, who was leaning against me and using healing magic, gave me a sidelong glance. Gerbera and Lobivia also looked my way. I knew what they were getting at.

“Rose, sit over here,” I ordered.

“Yes.”

She obediently did as she was told and sat on her heels. She still had her boorish axe in hand, just in case, which looked a little weird with her sitting like that.

“You listening?” I said, now that our eyes were level. “Rose, I wasn’t injured because of you. I was *saved* because of you.”

In that last instant, if Rose hadn’t risked her life to protect me, I would likely be dead now. The only reason I still drew breath was because of her. She’d once told me that she didn’t care if her body was reduced to wood chips if it was for the sake of protecting me, and her actions today proved she hadn’t been lying.

“Thank you, Rose,” I said, charging my words with all the gratitude and affection in my heart.

“Master...”

This time, my words got through to her. Rose’s stiff expression relaxed a little. Once I saw that, I felt relieved. I didn’t want to see her looking so depressed. I wanted to see her gentle smile, the one nobody could call a fake imitation anymore. That was the only thing on my mind. I reached out to touch Rose’s axe-wielding hand.

And then I collapsed.

“Huh?”

I could no longer see Rose’s surprised expression. The ground obstructed half my vision. I tried to get up, but my body wouldn’t move.

It’s cold. It’s so very cold. This is weird. This is wrong.

With those last thoughts in mind, my consciousness snapped and faded away instantly.



Before I knew it, I was a light floating in the darkness. The space was familiar; one could call it my inner world. That was supposed to be the case, but for some reason, I felt cold. Something was wrong. I could feel it. It was as if something inexplicable was lurking in the darkness.

What exactly happened? I had no idea why I was here. I couldn't remember the events that had led to this. In any case, staying here wouldn't solve anything, so I started moving the fiery projection of my body. The last time I was here, I'd figured out how this worked. If I surfaced, I would wake up.

However, the moment before I could, something leaped out of the darkness.

"Wha?!"

Something muddy coiled around my wrist, and I got goosebumps. That *thing* had the shape of a human hand. It looked like a poorly made clay model—or perhaps a rotting hand moments away from falling off a corpse.

"Caught you..."

I heard a man's excited voice. It wasn't mine, but a third party's. I shouldn't have been able to hear it in this world.

"Caught you... Caught you... Caught you..."

Another hand grabbed my shoulder, then a face came out of the depths of darkness.

"I caught..."

The face was also like melting mud. Not even a shadow of his once-elegant features remained. A deep laceration ran horizontally across his face. His eyes were crushed. Nevertheless, a dreadful tenacity born of karma had driven him to find me.

"I caught you, Majima..."

"Travis?!"

The crumbling face twisted in evil delight, and the broken remnants of the man smiled.

Chapter 10: After the Attack ~Lily's POV~

One night had passed since Edgar's attack. I deployed the healing light of magic and let out a sigh, making sure nobody noticed. He'd gotten us completely and utterly. We'd been on guard, yet we'd been caught off guard.

That said, the method he'd used to get in had already been cut off. Lobivia had witnessed the moment it happened, after all. According to her, she'd sensed some strange mana from one of the boxes sent from Rapha, so she'd knocked over the cart and discovered a mysterious jewel hidden within.

The jewel was violet with black lines running all over it. I hadn't seen it before, but she said it was the same thing Travis had used to escape during the Holy Order's assault. After confirming this with Shiran, we'd found out it was, in fact, the same thing Zoltan Michalek of the All-Seeing Eye had used to allow Edgar to escape.

From what we could infer, it was a magic tool that came as a pair. One was the entrance and the other the exit. Our security against outside threats to Kehdo was perfect, but that wasn't the case for the neighboring Rapha. A magic tool had been planted in their goods without their noticing.

After infiltrating Kehdo, the Battle Ogre had knocked Lobivia aside and attacked our master. Because of the poison he'd employed, our master was down for the count. He was now lying atop a bed, his eyelids shut. His consciousness was hazy. He did open his eyes once in a while, but he would immediately faint again.

Lobivia wiped the sweat off his brow, her movements stiff because of her broken arm hanging from a sling around her neck. After wiping all the way down his neck, she looked up at me.

"Hey Lily...shouldn't you get a li'l rest already?"

"No, I'm fine."

I'd been casting healing magic on our master the entire night. I had to; he'd been stabbed in his left arm. Even though it had been cleanly split open, my healing magic could close such a wound given time. In fact, it had already sealed. A fair portion of the poison had been removed from his system too. But this was, at most, a temporary solution. Whenever I stopped my magic, he would instantly start turning pale again.

Even when I used the strongest magic available to me, I couldn't completely remove the poison. Something bad had nestled in our master's body, and I couldn't get rid of it with my magic. That was why he kept relapsing. This was clearly abnormal. I had to do something about it, but...

"I've returned," Shiran said, entering the room.

"Welcome back, Shiran. How was it?"

"I've confirmed that the magic tool Edgar used is no longer present in the village."

Shiran had been on patrol with Leah, using the spirits to investigate whether there were any other teleportation runestones anywhere.

"Forgive me, Lily," Shiran said with an air of regret, her eye fixated on my sleeping master. "If I'd managed to capture Edgar, we might've been able to work something out."

"It's not your fault, Shiran."

I shook my head and stared back at her. She wore a fretful expression and looked exhausted. She was emaciated as if she were sick, as strange an analogy as that was for an undead monster.

"I was so close... I didn't think I would be influenced by this too."

The moment my master collapsed, Shiran had also weakened. It hadn't had any particular effect on me, so it was likely because she depended on his existence. Asarina was also in a dormant state, and Salvia hadn't come out since either.

"Well, fretting about what's done will do nothing," I said to console her. "Killing him won't heal my master, and even if we capture him, I doubt he'll talk."

"That's true, but..."

"Just seeing you back here safe is more than enough."

Even though Edgar had suffered significant wounds, Shiran was also pretty badly debilitated. If she'd pushed herself too far, she could've died.

"Besides, you brought back information for us too," I added, shifting the conversation to more practical matters. "Sorry, Shiran, I know you just got back, but let me ask you something. Edgar mentioned 'Holy Water,' right?"

"Yes, he did."

Shiran had been the last to cross blades with Edgar. When she did, Edgar had apparently left her with some parting remarks.

"Aah, so he finally fell over."

"What'd I do? Nothing to you."

"Your dear savior is getting murdered by Holy Water."

"If he's a big ol' savior, then he'll be able to overcome a li'l trial like this, yeah?"

He'd been making fun of us. He must've had a serious grudge to risk his life in that attack. Despite that, he'd withdrawn so easily. Well, Edgar's intentions didn't matter right now. The important thing was my master.

"So this Holy Water he mentioned is a superpower of one of the past saviors, right?"

"Yes." Shiran nodded. She was knowledgeable about this stuff. "It was the superpower of a famous savior who defeated the lords of four separate Dark Woods and even accumulated vast wealth as part of society."

"It kills monsters, so they call it the Holy Water that wards off evil, but it's actually poison, right? My master's no monster, and it's killing him."

"To put it bluntly...yes."

"A visitor's poison, huh? What a pain..."

Although his mana granted him resistance against poison, my master had collapsed. What's more, healing magic couldn't treat him. This all made sense if it was the work of a poison created from a visitor's inherent ability.

"But the lineage of Holy Water should already be extinct," Shiran explained. "I suppose it's possible that some Holy Water the great savior produced in the past remains with the church. Such items are called relics of salvation."

"A relic of salvation... That's quite an extreme weapon to bring out. How does it work?"

"It is said that Holy Water can be charged with the prayers of knights. Once charged, it is lethal to the average monster, and even the lord of a Dark Woods can be weakened significantly by it. In that state, it also bears another name—the Martyr's Arrow."

"Martyr"? That's a little ominous."

"A price must be paid to manifest its power. They say the knights who've offered their prayers have pretty much all perished."

"In other words, the savior was a poisoner who used the lives of others as a weapon... Oh, sorry. I took it too far there."

Seeing Shiran grimace, I gave her an apologetic bow. My tone had been bitter for a while now.

"It looks like I can't keep my cool," I added. "I'm so pathetic."

"No, it's understandable given the situation. It's already quite impressive that you're not panicking." Shiran shook her head, then got back on topic. "The legend of the savior of Holy Water says that knights on the verge of death after battle offered their own souls to the savior. The weapon used to strike Takahiro is probably the same."

"So someone's soul has forced their way inside him and is worming through his body?"

“Hm, an exorcism that uses one’s very soul as a weapon... No, what has affected Takahiro is far closer to a curse. The principle is the same as what the great savior once used, but the way it’s put to use is entirely different. This can’t be forgiven!”

Shiran’s voice turned hard, but upon realizing that she was getting heated, she unclenched her fist.



“In any case, two souls are now at war inside him,” Shiran continued. “The important thing for this battle is the strength of the soul and will, so there is no way Takahiro will lose. A visitor’s soul is far stronger than that of any resident of this world. Plus, Takahiro possesses tremendous willpower. Therefore, the problem is his physical body.”

“Meaning his body might weaken and die first?”

“Yes. There’s a chance it might. How is his current state?”

Shiran’s brow furrowed anxiously. My master was very dear to her too.

“He’s all right,” I said, smiling for her benefit. “He’s stable. Even if I use all my mana to heal him completely, his state will deteriorate again, so I’m keeping him stable by constantly casting weak healing magic. It’s painful to watch him suffer, but at the very least, there’s no risk of his body dying on him.”

“Is that so?” Shiran said, looking relieved from the bottom of her heart. “Thank goodness.”

“It’s vexing that I can only provide this makeshift solution, though.”

“It’s necessary right now. Nothing can be done if his body gives in before he manages to conquer the poison.”

“You’re right. I have to watch over his health until he manages to overcome it.”

“How long do you think you can maintain his condition?”

“On my own, maintaining this for a whole day is pushing it,” I answered. “But if Katou and Kei help out with their healing magic...”

“Mana and Kei can’t use healing magic continuously for that long, though, even when using weaker spells.”

“Yeah. That’s why it’ll still be pretty rough even if we take shifts.”

“We’ll have to work out a proper rotation...” Shiran then noticed Lobivia’s gloomy expression and cleared her throat. “Although, it’s possible he will conquer the poison within the day.”

Her words weren’t just to give Lobivia momentary peace of mind.

“We cannot remain so pessimistic,” Shiran added.

“You’re right. I’m sure he’ll manage,” I said.

I had a horrible premonition, though. I could feel it from the poison violating my master and my constant contact with him, even if only through magic. This poison was formidable. I had a hunch he wouldn’t be able to overcome it in a short period of time.

That said, it didn’t change what had to be done. All I had to do was believe in my master and do what I could to sustain him. Besides, if this dragged on for a while, I simply had to put in all my effort that much longer. My master was fighting right now too. I had to try just

as hard.

“Thanks for telling me all this, Shiran.”

“It was necessary,” she replied, shaking her head. She responded positively, but she looked exhausted. She really was out of sorts.

“Are you all right?” I asked. “Sorry for being unreasonable. Maybe you should get some—”

“I’m fine,” she said, standing ramrod straight. “Now that Takahiro has collapsed, I cannot afford to falter.”

Shiran had her position in the village to consider. By all rights, the village should’ve fallen, but it still managed because of the help it received from all fronts. However, that could only happen because of my master, who’d saved the village, and Shiran, a former resident who’d served as a lieutenant in the Alliance Knights.

People put in their best effort when they had something to believe in. With my master down, Shiran had to put on an even stronger front than before. I understood this, but there was a time and place for it, in my opinion.

“I think it’d be okay to let loose a bit when it’s only between us,” I said.

“Thank you, Lily, but I truly am fine now,” Shiran said with a smile, a certain strength behind her expression. “As Takahiro’s knight, I can’t afford to become exhausted so quickly.”

Her body was weakened, but her mind wasn’t. This was different from when she’d nearly degraded into a ghoul. From the looks of it, she really was all right. It was a relief. The bigger problem at hand was actually...

“Now that I think of it, is Mana resting?” Shiran asked, suddenly realizing the same thing I was thinking about. “I wanted to consult her about the Holy Water we just discussed.”

“Katou is with Rose.”

“Aah...”

Shiran made a pained expression. I also felt my chest tightening. I recalled how much of a mess Rose had been when our master collapsed. I’d never seen her like that before. Our master had been wounded and fallen right before her eyes, even though she’d been there at his side. I understood her feelings so well it was painful. Katou was with her right now, likely trying to get her to calm down.

“He’s stabilized, and the possibility for recovery is in sight,” Shiran said. “It’s probably best to inform her of such.”

“You’re right. I can’t step away right now, so can someone—”

The sound of knocking at the door interrupted me.

“Sister, it’s me.”

Speak of the devil, so they say. Rose and Katou came into the room. Rose had suffered significant damage in battle, but her repairs

were over now. The arm she'd lost was back to normal, and her footsteps were steady. She was also calm.

"I'm sorry for having been such a bother," Rose said.

"You weren't a bother at all. I was just worried," I told her.

"Thank you. I'm fine now."

"Good."

I gave Katou a look, and she nodded back to me, meaning Rose had calmed down.

"How is our master's condition?" Rose asked.

I gave Katou another look, then answered, "Well, for now, let me tell you what we know."

"Please do."

I told them everything I'd just discussed with Shiran. The more I said, the more I could see the light of hope shining in Rose's heart.

"Then he will be all right," she said, sighing with relief after I was done.

I was happy to see her so delighted. Everything would be back to normal once our master overcame the poison and recovered. However...

"Is something the matter, Mana?" Shiran asked.

"There's just a little something on my mind," Katou said, deep in thought, her hand to her mouth.

"What is it?"

There was no doubting Mana's wisdom. All of us listened carefully to what she had to say.

"I've got a question regarding this Holy Water," Katou continued. "Where exactly did Edgar get it from?"

"What do you mean, where?" I asked, cocking my head. It obviously came from the Holy Church.

"I mean, the Holy Order is under the direct command of the church, and they have influence, but a relic of salvation like Holy Water would be significantly valuable. Is it something a mere knight just walks around with?"

"You have a point there..."

The Holy Church revered saviors. They possessed many items related to saviors, but that didn't mean just any member could acquire them, especially precious artifacts.

"Is it possible that Travis had it?" I asked. "He's a company commander, right?"

"It's possible, but he didn't use Holy Water during the original attack," Katou said. "Not even when Lobivia cornered him."

"Oh yeah. He didn't, huh?"

"He might not have deemed it necessary, and Holy Water needs to go through some process to charge it with a soul, so maybe he just

hadn't been able to prepare it."

But what if that wasn't the case? Once I started thinking about it, I got the chills. What if *someone* was out there and had given it to Edgar? Just as that thought crossed my mind...

"It's pretty noisy outside..."

I heard voices outside the house, which were quickly followed by the sound of the door banging open. Everyone in the room suddenly went tense. As we readied ourselves for the worst, a voice called out from the hallway.

"This is awful!"

"Aunt Leah?" Shiran muttered.

Panicked footsteps stopped right in front of our room, and the door flew open.

"It's a disaster!"

Leah entered the room. All the blood had drained from her face. She was in such a fluster that she'd forgotten that our master was lying in bed.

"The army is attacking!" she screamed.

Nobody understood.

"What...did you just say?" I asked.

"The army is attacking!" Leah repeated fretfully. "It's the Maclaurin Provincial Army! They're marching this way, claiming they're here to subjugate the fake savior!"

Chapter 11: An Encounter at a Certain Street Corner ~Okazaki Takuma's POV~

“Oh?”

I heard a voice just as I was about to leave the inn and turned around. An older girl was looking my way. She was Kuriyama Moeko, the girl who'd served as a guard for the exploration team leader.

“Are you going into town?” she asked. “As a member of the exploration team's upper brass, do refrain from cutting loose too much, Okazaki.”

“Ha ha. I know.”

As one of the nicknamed cheaters in the exploration team, my title among the students was the Almighty Vessel Okazaki Takuma—not that I'd asked for it. I'd simply met the expectations of what others wanted from me, but the power I'd obtained after coming to this world was just a little *too* great. It was a pain in the ass. On the other hand, it was also a pain that I couldn't just ignore everyone and say I didn't care.

“I'm just gonna go around and take in the sights. It'll be like doing a social study. Wanna come along, Kuriyama?”

“I have things to do.”

Now that was unfortunate. She'd rejected me, but there was no helping that. Kuriyama was *always* busy. In title, she was Nakajima's guard, but he didn't need anything of the like, so in truth, she was closer to his secretary. Nakajima could be pretty lackadaisical about stuff sometimes, so her job was quite a lot of work. He was really talented in all sorts of ways, however.

“Do be careful not to do anything unnecessary,” she warned me one last time.

“Yeah, yeah.”

With that, I left the inn.



The exploration team was currently staying in a small inn town. We planned to stay here for two days. We were all cheaters who had outlandish stamina, so although we needed supplies, we had very little

need for rest. The reason we were spending two days here regardless was because they'd told us that they wanted to hold a banquet for us.

For the exploration team members, today was something like a day off, and about half our members had gone out into town. Some were taking it easy at the inn, while others, like our leader, had taken on the job of suppressing monsters in the area. Kuriyama was probably busy with that last one. Someone had to work out the operation details with the locals.

In any case, none of that had anything to do with me. That said, I wasn't thinking of playing around in town like the others either. I suppose you could say I had something I needed to do. It was one of the problems that came with having power, and a bit of a pain in the ass for me.

Kuriyama had told me not to do anything unnecessary, but this was this, and that was that. She'd just have to give up on that hope—not that I planned on screwing up in a way that anyone would notice.

I walked in the opposite direction of the marketplace and came to a stop when I was out of sight from the public eye.

“All righty then. Time to get going.”

I hummed a tune with a tippity tap, but it wasn't that I'd had the sudden urge to practice tap dancing. I was focusing the mana in my body.

“Hup!”

After about five seconds of little steps, I kicked off the ground with a bit of force.

I felt a floating sensation and a slipping sensation, then I felt as if I was somewhere else.

“And that's that.”

By the time I landed on the ground, the scenery had changed. I was in another alley, but one very different from before. It was actually an entirely different town, one I'd visited in the past, and it was about a hundred kilometers from the town I had just been in. In other words, I'd teleported.

Teleporting was unusual, even in this world where magic existed; it was only possible with the inherent ability of a visitor.

“Phew.”

Feeling lethargic, I let out a sigh. I'd exhausted a pretty large amount of mana all at once—the one flaw of this method of travel. It was still pretty convenient, though.

“Mister Takuma!”

I shifted my focus to the shadow standing in the alley. I'd known she was there all along, so I wasn't surprised to hear her call out.

“Hey now. Didn't I tell you to wait for me at the inn?” I said.

“F-Forgive me.”

This girl's name was Sarah. I'd saved her from a spat of trouble some time ago. Patterns drawn with white dye adorned her face, which was characteristic of the people who lived in the prairies neighboring the Woodlands.

"I was so happy for your return that I couldn't wait," she said.

"I see. Heh heh. Well, no helping that, I guess."

"Anyways, you really did appear out of nowhere. That surprised me."

Sarah looked at me with earnest respect.

"That was nothing," I said, chuckling.

"That's not true! That's your ability as a savior, isn't it?"

"Nope."

"Huh?"

She was confused, but I couldn't blame her for that. I didn't mind explaining it to her, but I figured I would leave that fun for later.

"Sorry, Sarah. That's all the time I have for chitchat. I've got something to do today."

"Oh. Are you sure?"

"Yup. It pains me, but I gotta go. Head on back to the inn and get some food ready or something, will you?"

"Understood."

Sarah nodded, not questioning my order whatsoever. Life would be so much easier if everyone listened so readily. Nevertheless, there was no point in complaining about that.

I got moving right away, and after coming out onto the main street, I started walking through the hustle and bustle of town.

"Hm?"

On the way, I noticed a little fuss going on.

"You filthy prairie dweller! You dare make light of me?!"

I came to a stop. "Prairie dweller" referred to the tribe Sarah belonged to. She'd gone off in a different direction, but I had to check just to be sure, so I made my way toward the ruckus.

"F-Forgive me. Please forgive me..."

Unfortunately, it wasn't Sarah. It was a young boy who looked no older than ten, begging for forgiveness from some self-important man. White dye decorated the boy's cheek much like Sarah's. His body was covered in scrapes, perhaps from tumbling after being struck.

Much like the name implied, prairie dwellers lived outside of towns in the prairies, raising cattle to make a livelihood. Most people in this world spent their entire lives inside the walls of the town they were born in, so those who didn't were seen as abnormal. Because of that, people regarded prairie dwellers with prejudice. They were similar to elves, in that sense. It was said that they often faced unreasonable treatment in towns. Saving Sarah from similar trouble

was actually how I'd met her.

I thought about what I should do. This boy was part of Sarah's tribe, so it was possible that they were acquaintances. I didn't want to get involved in any trouble, but I had no other choice. However, before I took action...

"What are you doing?!" a blond man yelled, stepping out of the crowd.

He was a little high-strung, but he looked like a serious and intense young man. He had a well-trained body, and considering all his equipment, I knew at first sight that he was a soldier. He probably had experience on the battlefield. The intimidating air he gave off as he let his righteous indignation flare was pretty impressive.

"Wh-What do you want, youngster? Do you know who I am?!" the older man yelled back at him. Rather than having any backbone, he seemed used to throwing his weight around, so he couldn't back down. I felt a little sorry for him. The young soldier who confronted him didn't falter before such a measly threat, of course.

"I don't know who you are," he said, placing his hand on the sword at his waist. "I am Louis Bard. I've been entrusted with Margrave Maclaurin's forces. I cannot possibly stand by and let an injustice pass."

With that, soldiers made their way through the crowd.

"Arrest him," Louis ordered.

"W-Wait a moment! P-Please wait!"

The old man started panicking. He came to the realization that this young soldier was someone of status. In an instant, he took on a subservient attitude.

"Please listen to me, sir. This boy's a prairie dweller!"

"And what of it? We are all fellow humans living in these harsh lands. One's lineage has nothing to do with it. I'll listen to your story in detail later. Be at ease. If you've committed no crimes, you'll be released shortly."

His judgment was fair. He seemed to have a splendid character.

"Goddammit!"

The old man started running, so he'd probably done something to feel guilty about. His belly jiggled as he went. Someone who barely had any exercise wasn't going to get away like that. The soldiers caught him immediately and twisted his arm behind his back. The man screamed, sounding pitiful. He got what he deserved.

"Take the boy in. Treat his wounds for him."

"Understood."

The young soldier passed out his orders after expertly defusing the situation. I made sure of this, then left. I had a promise to keep.

So that was Louis Bard. I'd heard the name before. Iino had talked

about him after she returned to the exploration team. She'd also mentioned Margrave Maclaurin, so it was definitely the same man. It was a weird coincidence to bump into someone like him after sneaking away from the exploration team.

Iino had ended up fighting Majima because of the false information Louis had given her. She'd said that Louis was a fine man overflowing with a sense of justice, so if he'd intentionally passed that kind of information... Well, her expression had been quite dark at the time.

From the looks of it, there was no need to worry about that. On the contrary, I'd seen something positive. This world needed more people like him.

With that thought in mind, I came out into the town's plaza, where I'd promised to meet someone.

"You're late." Right off the bat, he greeted me with a complaint, but the boy's frown quickly turned into a friendly smile. "I'm glad you're here. Good to see you're the same as ever, Okazaki."

"You too, Jinguuji."

The person I'd promised to meet here, the Dragon Jinguuji Tomoya, furrowed his manly brow.

"I want your help. Will you hear me out?"

"That's why I came," I said, shrugging.



"Okazaki. Wake up."

I opened my eyes to a voice calling me. I'd apparently fallen asleep while sitting up. I'd had a dream, one of something that had happened a little while ago. The person from my dreams was right in front of me now.

"Jinguuji? Is it time?"

"Yeah," he answered briefly.

There was no helping it, then. I stretched my arms and stood up. It was a bit of a pain, but it was time to go save people. I wanted to get it over with quickly and go enjoy some of Sarah's cooking.

Chapter 12: A Clue ~Iino Yuna's POV~

After reuniting with Jinguuji in Viscount Bann's castle, I headed out to link back up with Gordon and the knights of the Holy Order's Second Company.

"Welcome back, Miss Iino," Gordon greeted me as I arrived at the inn we'd selected beforehand.

"I'm back, Sir Gordon. Have there been any developments?"

"Please listen to this. We've acquired information about a savior. What's more, they are in very close proximity to here."

Gordon looked excited. He immediately signaled to have a map spread across his table and began telling me about the new information.

"There are eyewitness accounts of a savior staying in this village here. After that, the information moves to this village. It's right next to the one we're in now," he said, his thick finger tracing along the map. "Normally, we would start by passing the information to the First Company, but it'll be faster to go there ourselves. We may finally have a lead on the fake savior."

"I'm surprised," I muttered. "That's where I planned to go next."

"What?"

The village Gordon had pointed out was the one where, according to Jinguuji, I could find some former exploration team members. It was a bit of a shock, but after thinking about it logically, that village was close to the town we were staying in now. It wasn't strange that Gordon's group had acquired information on it. I went on to tell him about how I'd met Jinguuji at Viscount Bann's castle and of what Jinguuji had told me.

"I see. So that's what's going on? Not a fake, but real saviors. Forgive me," Gordon said, looking somewhat ashamed.

"It's fine. You didn't know," I said, then pointed to the map. "There's a Dark Woods close to this village. They probably went there to protect the villagers from monsters."

"Ooh, I'd expect nothing less of the hallowed saviors," one of the knights said with a sigh of admiration.

"This has nothing to do with the fake savior," I said, looking around at the others, "but I'd like to inform them of the situation. If they know about it, they'll have a better chance of doing something if

someone accuses them of being fakes. How about it?"

I was a little worried they wouldn't go along with it, but Gordon nodded deeply.

"Of course. We do not wish for the great saviors to be subject to unjust criticism either."

"Thank you very much."

Things went off without a hitch, and we packed up within the day and headed out toward the village in question.



The manamobile clattered about on our way there.

"You seem to be in a good mood," Gordon suddenly said from the seat next to mine.

"Huh?"

I looked back at him in confusion. The other knights riding with us were all smiling at me. It was only then that I realized that I'd been humming quietly in rhythm with the shaking carriage.

"Ah..." My cheeks got hotter, and I averted my eyes. "Ha ha. I might've cut loose a little."

Up until now, we'd been chasing rumors, but we'd hit several dead ends. The credibility of the stories were constantly in question, and villages that we'd visited had already been reduced to ghost towns. This was the first time we had some tangible results.

"I relaxed a bit too much. Sorry," I said.

"There's no need to apologize, madam," Gordon said. "You've been helping us with our work so passionately. We feel the same."

"That's good then." I smiled, then grimaced. "But we're back to square one with the fake savior, aren't we?"

"It seems so."

Up until now, we'd gotten no useful clues. All we'd found was the damage done. We'd already discovered several villages that, after an eyewitness account of a fake savior, had been utterly destroyed by a monster attack. In all cases, the culprit had been welcomed as a savior, and before their true identity could be discovered, they had run away. We believed they'd dragged monsters into the village to erase any evidence. Their actions were nothing short of brutish.

Who could it be? Considering how scattered these incidents had been and how wide an area they covered, it was hard to imagine that there was only one culprit. But if there were multiple, why did they go to these villages and do nothing but accept a hero's welcome?

Taking that into consideration, the other possibility sounded more likely—in short, that it was the work of the culprit behind Fort Tilia's attack, the Lord of Darkness, Kudou Riku. He hated humanity, and he had more than enough of a motive to do this.

However, if Kudou Riku was the fake savior, some parts of this didn't make sense. Why would he do things in such a roundabout manner? He had the ability to freely manipulate monsters, so if he wanted to destroy villages, he could simply trample them down without having to do something so circuitous as going there in person and pretending to be a savior.

So why? I tried to come up with some reason, but I didn't have a clue. I wasn't suited for this stuff. They said detectives had to earn their keep on the scene. That wasn't really the case here, but our only choice was to continue gathering information and catch the culprit red-handed.

But just catching them in the act wouldn't be enough. Gordon's knights were carrying out the investigation with great vigor, but if the culprit was in fact the Lord of Darkness, then even if they caught him in the act, he would certainly strike them all down. It would be nice if I just happened to be present, but I couldn't always be with them.

So what were we to do? I had an idea.

"I have a suggestion regarding the former exploration team members currently staying in the village we're on our way to," I said. "I was thinking of asking them to help with our investigation. The exploration team has many members who have a strong sense of justice. If we ask, I'm pretty sure they'll agree. In truth, they left the exploration team and came here because they wanted to answer the hopes of the nobles whose lands are suffering damage from monster attacks."

"Really? How commendable," Gordon said. "I was under the impression that the saviors staying in the village were merely visiting on their way to the imperial capital."

"Aah. Now that you mention it, I didn't say anything about that, huh? When the exploration team was staying at Fort Ebenus, they came into contact with the nobles from this region. The nobles appealed to them many times, saying their lands suffered from monster attacks, so some of our members left to come here. There are some like Jinguuji who are living under the care of nobles like Viscount Bann, but apparently, there are also others going around to villages on their own."

They were the ones who would presumably help with our investigation. After all, they kept their distance from nobles precisely because they hadn't come here to live in luxury.

"Seems like there're others going around village to village without bothering any nobles. 'We're fighting to save those in need,' so they say. They're the ones with proper motives, unlike the happy-go-lucky idiots like me."

That was what Jinguuji had said. They went around with no

support, suppressing monsters in the region without even asking for recompense. I was sure they would aid our investigation.

“Hm?” It was then that I heard a groan come from Gordon. There was a small crease between his brows. “The saviors are going around to villages on their own?”

“Huh? Yes. That’s what I heard.”

“Is that so...?”

I was a little bewildered by how unconvinced he sounded.

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

“No. Not really. It’s nothing serious,” Gordon answered after a short pause. “I was simply wondering why they aren’t coordinating with nobles.”

“Huh?”

“It would be more efficient to suppress monsters in the region by cooperating with the local authorities.”

It was more like he was purely curious, rather than stating an opinion. He had a point too.

“Well...”

In terms of efficiency, coordinating with the local nobles would be best. They were the ones at their wits’ end from these monster attacks, so they’d happily cooperate however they could. That wasn’t necessarily always the case, of course. Working with nobles came with its own inconveniences. For example, if a noble prioritized their own profits over the people’s safety and that sort of injustice sat poorly with the visitor, it would actually be better to refuse to work with them.

But did the students who came to these lands even think about it that far? Did their refusal to live in luxury really come with noble intentions? Seized by such suspicions, I remained at a loss for several seconds.

Just then, the manamobile shook greatly, and the grating sound of the brakes resounded in the air.

“What happened?!” Gordon roared, his expression instantly turning into that of a commander on the field.

“Bad news!” the knight at the driver’s seat yelled. “Monsters!”

That was all I needed to hear. I leaped from the carriage. First, I had to assess the situation. I could see a monster that looked like a big dog covered in scales charging down the road toward us. By the time I identified it, I’d already brandished my sword.

Monster encounters were frequent during any journey in this world. This wasn’t the first time during my travels with Gordon’s knights that we’d run up on some.

It ended in an instant. Before the monster even recognized my presence, I cut off its head.

“O-Oooh!” the knight in the driver’s seat exclaimed. “That was splendid, Miss Iino!”

“It was nothing.”

I swung the blood off my sword and was about to return it to its sheath, but I stopped just as the tip of the blade went in.

“Graaawr!”

A beastly howl struck my ears, and I turned around instantly. A huge ape with blue fur was glaring at me from beyond the trees some distance from the road. It was another monster. It puffed out its chest, opened its mouth wide, and roared. I slammed my sword into its mouth.

“Grah?!”

I gave it no time to react. I crushed its brain, and the monster died in an instant. This level of monster was nothing to me.

“What’s going on...?”

My voice sounded grave. After all, I’d grasped what was happening. I showed no interest in the giant ape as it collapsed to the ground, and instead returned to the manamobile where Gordon and the other knights waited.

“Miss Iino, I’d expect nothing less of—”

“It’s an emergency!” I yelled, cutting Gordon off. “I sense monsters all around us!”

The knights, who’d relaxed somewhat, all gasped. Gordon was the first to adapt and speak.

“How many?” he asked.

He really was the vice marshal of the elite Holy Order. He got right to the point.

“I don’t know how many exactly, but...a whole lot.”

There was a centipede with gaping maws on both ends of its body, a frog the size of a cow, a lizard with a sharpened cranium like a sword, and ten or so other monsters headed our way. They were still a distance away, but it wouldn’t be long before they reached us.

Realizing the situation we were in, the knights started panicking.

“How can this be? So many monsters at once...?”

Under normal circumstances, the spectacle before them would have been impossible. Excluding famous examples of migratory monsters like tripdrills and species like the blowfox—like the one Majima had with him—monsters didn’t normally gather in packs. It was even more unheard of for monsters of different species to attack the same target at once.

This was the stuff of legends, like the tale of the savior who’d suffered a crushing defeat in the Abyss five hundred years ago, or like the major incident at a certain fortress far more recently.

“This probably isn’t all of them,” I said.

The pieces of the puzzle were falling in place. It was an unexpected development, but in a certain sense, it also answered all of my doubts.

“Aah... I get it. That’s what’s going on,” I muttered bitterly.

“Miss Iino?”

I strengthened my grip on my sword and gritted my teeth. I swallowed my anger, then turned to face the monsters.

“I’ll exterminate them,” I declared. “The rest of you abandon the vehicle and return the way you came.”

“No, if we’re returning, then you should come with—”

“I’m going to continue to the village.”

“You can’t! That’s too dangerous!” Gordon yelled, moving in front of me and blocking my path. “It’s dangerous for a savior to stand against so many monsters on their own. What do you think we knights exist for?”

“Sir Gordon...”

His stern expression indicated that he was worried for my safety from the bottom of his heart.

“We exist to fall in place of the saviors,” he continued. “Only the saviors can save the world. That is why we take up our swords and freely give them our lives.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but...”

Although the powers visitors gained by coming to this world weren’t absolute, they still put us far above all others. Even cheaters without nicknames could defeat monsters with ease. When a group like the exploration team traveled together, there was no danger whatsoever. That was liable to make one misunderstand. Monsters posed more than enough of a threat to saviors too.

An enemy that could be easily defeated one-on-one would be much more formidable in a group of ten. More than ten, and there was a significant risk of death. Saviors were still human. Exhaustion and fatigue were inevitable. Even throughout history, many saviors had died in battle against monsters. I didn’t know much about it, but this was why the Imperial Knights and Holy Order always accompanied any saviors.

“So return with us,” Gordon said.

“But I have to go.”

I shook my head. I was fully aware of the danger, but I couldn’t step down. I had to strike down evil. That was what the Skanda’s power existed for.

“I’ll be fine,” I said, smiling. “I’m not charging in recklessly. I’ll run away if it gets dangerous.”

“Miss Iino...”

“Please relax. I’m actually pretty strong.”

It would be suicidal for any other member of the exploration team to charge into a swarm of monsters, but I had a nickname among cheaters. I was the Skanda. I was the strongest in the exploration team when it came to hand-to-hand combat.

“I’m going.”

I kicked off the ground in top gear. The burning emotion in my heart, undoubtedly from the flames of anger I felt toward wicked deeds, fueled my legs into motion. It burned brightly with no signs of fading and sent my body flying forward. With thoughts of what awaited me filling my mind, I strengthened my grip on the sword in my hand.

Chapter 13: The Skanda and the Demon King Cross Paths ~Iino Yuna's POV~

Let's sum up the situation. I'd been traveling with the Second Company of the Holy Order, chasing rumors of a fake savior, but we hadn't gotten any results yet. The fake savior's actions were incomprehensible. Because of that, I suspected the Lord of Darkness, Kudou Riku, as the culprit.

But even if he was the fake savior, why would he do something so roundabout as visiting these villages and announcing himself as a savior? All of the answers were now before me.

Former exploration team members were supposed to be in this village. What then appeared was an abnormal number of monsters. That meant...

"Found you. The root of all evil."

After cutting down over twenty monsters, I finally came to a stop. A slender young man, surrounded by monsters and standing atop a cliff, turned my way. He had meek features and cold eyes. He was the Demon King who'd lost all hope in humanity. I'd found exactly what I'd expected.

"The Lord of Darkness, Kudou Riku!"

I screamed his name in anger, and he returned a faint smile. A chill ran down my spine. All of his emotions were dead behind that smile.

"And you're Iino Yuna? It's been since the Mad Beast incident, hasn't it?"

Kudou faced me with a cool demeanor. He showed no signs of faltering before the exploration team's Skanda. Did that mean he had that much confidence in his own power? In truth, there were many monsters in the area. Among them was one who looked like Juumonji too. It was a spawn of the doppelqueen Anton, copying his form. We'd fought on a common front during the battle against Takaya, but this time we were enemies. There were other monsters I'd seen before, and others I hadn't. Dozens of them were gathered here. All this was enough to crush even a cheater at a warrior's level.

"But the root of all evil? What a strange thing to say," Kudou said boastfully. "I'm the Demon King. True, you could say I'm the very

essence of evil, but I have no idea why you would say I'm the cause of the misdeeds done here."

"Quit screwing around!"

Was he really trying to play dumb now? Fine. In that case, I'd expose everything. I suppressed my anger and chose my words carefully.

"Lately, someone who claims to be a savior has been visiting several villages in the vicinity, and those same villages were trampled by monsters. Despite all the destruction, the fake savior in question was never found, no matter how much we searched."

The Second Company of the Holy Order was proactively on the hunt, yet they hadn't managed to find a single clue. They were completely empty-handed.

"But isn't that obvious?" I continued. "Right? There was nothing like that in the first place!"

I pointed my sword at Kudou's unconcerned smile.

"A former exploration team member was at the village near here. A real savior. I'm sure others were in all the villages annihilated by monsters. You've been aiming to kill visitors, just like you did at Fort Tilia. That's why you had your monsters attack those villages. That's why news of a fake savior visiting them spread. Isn't that right?!"

I'd always wondered why Kudou would pretend to be a savior and visit these villages before attacking them, but that wasn't the case. The truth had been twisted. He hadn't pretended to be a savior; a real savior had been to those villages. We would never find a fake, because nothing like that had existed to begin with and the real saviors had all been killed.

Thinking back, this was the reason I'd never met any of the former exploration team members who should've been in the region.

"Answer me! Kudou Riku!"

"Heh."

He let out a breath, and his shoulders began shaking as if he couldn't contain it anymore.

"Pffft. Hah... Ha ha ha ha ha!"



His laughter shook the air. Two bloodied bodies lay at the Demon King's feet. I knew their faces and names. Those boys had been exploration team members. I couldn't take it anymore.

"What's so funny?!"

I kicked off the ground. Countless monsters stood between me and Kudou, but what of it? None of that mattered to me.

"Out of the way!"

I cut, stabbed, kicked, and jumped. I killed all who crossed my path and landed. It was just one more push to reach him. A smile remained plastered on Kudou's face, maybe because he couldn't even react yet. That was fine. I was going to teach him a lesson. Just as I thought that, Kudou's shadow stood up right in front of me.

"Wha—?!"

"I won't let you!"

A girl who looked like she was made entirely of shadows jumped out. Her arms turned into swords and caught my strike. My sword sank deep, but it didn't sever the shadowy blades.

"Wretched human! You won't block my king's path!"

"Ugh!"

She pushed back. She wasn't anywhere close to Majima's servant Gerbera, but she was still pretty strong. It would be difficult to defeat her instantly.

"You help too, Emil!" the girl screamed.

An enormous beast leaped out from the swarm of monsters.

"Graaawr!"

"No way?!"

Its attack was sharp and heavy, and even though I managed to block it, it blew me away a good distance.

"Ugh... You're kidding..."

I stabbed my sword into the ground to bring myself to a stop. I wasn't hurt, but this was quite the mental shock.

"Takaya?!"

"Grrr!"

I couldn't mistake that fiendish figure covered in bristling red fur for anyone else.

"You're working for Kudou Riku now?!"

After turning into the Mad Beast, Takaya had vanished into the mountains. Since then, his whereabouts had been unknown. I never thought he'd be with Kudou. The last time I'd seen him, he was covered in wounds, but it looked like he'd gotten treatment since then. He was still missing an arm, but he was otherwise in perfect shape.

Now that I understood the situation, I gritted my teeth. Takaya's Mad Lycanthropy was an inherent ability tailored for battle. He was

pretty strong in combat even among all the cheaters. The shadowy girl was here too, making it hard for me to arrest Kudou. Considering all the other monsters he had at hand, the worst was entirely possible.

“But even so, I...”

“Ha ha. That was a good laugh,” Kudou muttered, the remnants of a smile still lingering on his lips.

“What?”

The anger in my chest flared up once more. He was making fun of me again. I glared at him.

“What’s so funny?!”

“It’s just hilarious, isn’t it?” he said brazenly, looking down at me triumphantly. “You seem to be misunderstanding something here. I’ve got nothing to do with these fake savior incidents.”

He spoke indifferently, as if none of this was his concern.

“Huh?”

I was dumbfounded. I hadn’t expected this, and there was a limit to such shameless behavior.

“Nothing to do with...? What nonsense are you spouting?!”

It was a lousy joke. It was practically a miracle that I hadn’t lunged at him in anger.

“Then what are those bodies at your feet?!” I screamed.

“This is this, that is that. Not that you look like you’ll listen to me,” Kudou said, sighing. “Well, I don’t have any obligation to explain things to you, nor is there time to.”

With that, he called a horselike monster to his side.

“You’re running away?!”

“Yes.”

Kudou mounted the horse with unexpected grace. At this rate, he would get away. I stifled my surging impatience and began thinking.

“Huh? Aren’t I one of the humans you’re supposed to be killing? Haah... Not much of a Demon King if you’re just chickening out.”

“You wretch...”

The shadowy girl flared in anger at my provocation, but not even a single ripple altered Kudou’s expression.

“It doesn’t matter what you say. I have no intention of fighting you.”

“Do you think you can get away from me?”

Judging that this approach wouldn’t work, I tried a different angle to shake him up. Takaya being among the enemy forces was unexpected, but there wasn’t that much of a difference between me and all of Kudou’s monsters put together. Actually, pursuing a fleeing foe would allow me to demonstrate my specialty to its fullest.

Kudou was calm as he said, “Oh, I’ll get away, all right. I can say it with certainty. You won’t defeat me. Besides...” Still mounted on

horseback, he turned his gaze to the side. "I said there's no time, right? I wasn't talking about me."

"What are you saying?"

I carefully followed Kudou's gaze, wary of any traps, then froze.

"Th-That's..."

I could see a village from our vantage atop the cliff. It was a small and simple settlement that could be found anywhere, and right now, a swarm of monsters was charging toward it. There were so many of them. They numbered one, maybe two hundred, or maybe even more. At the very least, a village like that had no chance of survival.

"S-Stop them!" I yelled, turning back to Kudou.

This was the Lord of Darkness's power. He was doing something outrageous. He'd said he didn't intend to fight, but that was out of the question. I couldn't possibly let him get away now. I had to beat him down here and now. I steeled myself and was just about to charge at him, when Kudou opened his mouth.

"Unfortunately, those aren't my pawns. There's no point in defeating me."

"Huh?" I came to a stop after taking only a single step toward him. "What are you saying?"

"Right now, I can subdue around a thousand monsters to my will. This is my power as a Demon King. That's also my limit, though. Those monsters aren't under my control, so it's a waste of time to do anything to me."

"That can't—"

"Don't believe me? Whatever then. Shall we have at it?"

Kudou raised his hand, and all of his servants in the area poised themselves to charge at me as one.

"From my perspective, it might be nice to crush a panicking Skanda who's incapable of displaying her true strength," he said, his smile cold and penetrating. "Either way, that village will get annihilated in the meantime."

"Ugh..."

"Let me tell you one more thing. I've got about three hundred of my servants here. You kill me, and they'll go out of control too. So? What'll you do?"

It was cruel of him to push that decision on me.

"G-Guhhh..."

I had no choice. Having come to that understanding, I lowered my sword.

"I'm glad you get it," Kudou said, nodding in satisfaction. "I heard the exploration team's Skanda was foolhardy and thoughtless, but it looks like I got through to you just fine."

"And now you're making fun of me?"

“I’m praising you. You aren’t thoughtless. Everyone makes mistakes.”

Kudou turned his horse around, then suddenly looked back at me one more time as if on a whim.

“You got pretty close to the truth, but there are others who are far more foolish than you think they are—far more foolish than you. That’s all this was.”

“What? What does that...?”

“Well then, if you’ll excuse me.”

He didn’t answer. The time for whimsy was over. Kudou took his servants and calmly left me behind.

Chapter 14: Unshakable Heart

~Lily's POV~

“Subjugate the fake savior...?” I repeated in a daze.

Leah’s news was so shocking that I nearly stopped healing my master. I’d heard of the fake savior rumors, and I also knew that several villages had been destroyed, but I had no idea what any of those stories had to do with my master. It almost sounded like a bad joke, but Leah’s expression was dead serious.

“A messenger from Diospyro just arrived. The information is certain,” Leah explained.

“A messenger...?”

“Excuse me.”

A one-armed man wearing the uniform of Aker’s Royal Army entered the room behind Leah.

“Adolf?” Shiran said, a look of disbelief on her face.

“Shiran. I didn’t think we’d meet again like this.”

This was Adolf, a soldier stationed in the neighboring town of Diospyro. He’d once been a knight at Fort Tilia, but after losing an arm, he’d returned to his home in Aker to work as an instructor for the army. He was Shiran’s former comrade in arms. In the past, we’d gotten a runestone from him to use for our manamobile.

“Adolf, I’ll excuse myself here. I leave the rest in your hands,” Leah said, her face pale as she exited the room.

“You’ve been through a lot,” Adolf said, turning back to Shiran. “Prince Philip told me everything, including what happened to your body. I’m disappointed you couldn’t tell me yourself.”

“I’m sorry...”

“Don’t be. I jest. You had to consider Takahiro too. I know these things can’t be made known so frivolously.”

Behind Adolf’s smile was consideration for his comrade. That only lasted for a second, though. Adolf’s eyes moved over to the figure of my sleeping master.

“I hurried to bring news of what was going on without resting on my way from Diospyro... But to think he would collapse...”

“Adolf, are you certain Margrave Maclaurin has sent his army this way?” Shiran asked.

Adolf nodded meekly. “Yes. The information comes from the army. The margrave’s soldiers had already gotten quite close by the

time I left Diospyro. A man named Louis Bard is leading them. Officially, they're here to subjugate the fake savior involved in Fort Tilia's attack, the Wicked Monster Tamer Majima Takahiro. We've confirmed around five thousand soldiers."

"Five thousand?!" I yelled. "He sent five thousand soldiers just to kill my master?!"

"More specifically, I'd say they were gathered to kill him and all his servants," Shiran said, her expression grave. "It's not really outrageous. Hypothetically...just hypothetically, if I were in their position, I would make the same decision. That isn't just because it's Takahiro either. The great saviors are said to possess strength to match a thousand, so you would need more than a half-baked force to deal with one."

Shiran's voice was stiff. Even discussing the hypothetical possibility of pointing a blade at a savior was uncomfortable for her.

"They also have to consider you and Gerbera, who can hound a warrior-class visitor on your own. And though it's presumptuous, I'm here too. With Rose and all of his other servants together, Takahiro possesses more strength than the average visitor. That is exactly why..."

"They want to pulverize him with the weight of a huge army?" I finished.

"That's the gist of it."

I didn't want to admit it, but it made sense. Shiran said that a visitor was strong enough to match a thousand. Conversely, a thousand people were enough to kill a visitor.

Reality wasn't that simple, of course, but even a superhuman had their limits. It was harder to deal with larger numbers of enemies, not to mention the accumulation of fatigue and wounds resulting from such a fight. Numbers possessed a violence all their own.

"Margrave Maclaurin is the leader of all the southern imperial nobles. He owns more territory than the entirety of Aker, and more wealth than we could ever fathom. I've heard he has easily more than ten thousand soldiers at his beck and call. If he truly plans to attack Takahiro, I'd expect at least that many soldiers to come."

Shiran paused, a deep crease forming between her brows.

"But there's one thing I don't understand."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Why Margrave Maclaurin's army crossed over Aker's border."

I cocked my head, so Shiran went on to explain it in detail for me.

"Naturally, a foreign army cannot enter another country's territory of its own accord. There are cases when an army is invited, given the circumstances, but as you know, Aker and the Margraviate of Maclaurin are on extremely bad terms. It would take something

considerable for Aker to allow their armies across the border.”

“Even if Maclaurin’s army had a reason, they’d never get permission. We never know what they’ll do while they’re here,” Adolf added bitterly. His position as a soldier entrusted with national defense played a big role in his response. It looked like Aker and the Margraviate of Maclaurin really didn’t get along.

“So why?” Shiran asked dubiously. “Shouldn’t the provincial army’s border transgression have been detected earlier than this?”

“It wasn’t. Those bastards never gave notice and suddenly appeared on the border.”

“Impossible... That’s practically an invasion,” Shiran said in disbelief. “What was the army doing?”

“We couldn’t do anything,” Adolf answered regretfully, having predicted her question. “The Holy Order is accompanying them.”

“What...?” Shiran froze. She probably had a rough idea now of what was going on. “Did you just say the Holy Order?”

“Yes. I heard that knights of the Holy Order are accompanying the Maclaurin Provincial Army. As such, it’s an expedition of justice. A simple soldier has no say in it. On the contrary...of all things, those bastards in the provincial army are claiming this is revenge for the Fourth Company’s annihilation.”

“No way...” Shiran replied before going silent.

“I get it now. They got us,” I said, biting my lip as I figured it out. “That’s why Edgar suddenly attacked us like that.”

My master was bedridden because of Edgar’s attack. It couldn’t be a coincidence.

“Meaning Travis and the margrave are in cahoots,” I concluded.

I’d also heard the name Louis Bard before. He’d been with Travis when Iino had gotten false information about us in Serrata. They’d definitely been conspiring together since then to bring down my master.

“That’s so cruel...”

I couldn’t help but realize how bad things were. They’d prepared five thousand soldiers just to crush us. What’s more, our forces were significantly hampered. Shiran was remarkably weaker than usual, and I had to focus on my healing magic and couldn’t move from my master’s side. Above all else, my master was unconscious.

I looked around the room and saw anxiety dominating Lobivia’s childish face. Her small hands gripped the sheet of our master’s bed. I managed to keep myself from breaking down, but it was hard to claim I was composed. Anxiety was contagious. It spread farther and farther, dyeing all hearts in darkness. A heavy atmosphere hung over the room.

“Sister. May I say something?” Rose asked, suddenly speaking up.

Her calm demeanor left me dumbfounded for a moment. Rose was acting entirely normal.

“Huh? Oh, sure. What is it?”

“How will we take action?” she inquired, as if it was a perfectly natural segue.

Even considering that her emotions didn’t really show on the surface, I couldn’t sense any agitation in her. She was merely asking about what was necessary.

“If we only ponder over how bad the situation is, nothing will change,” she said calmly. “No matter what is going on, our objective has already been decided. We have to protect our master. We must take action to accomplish that. Am I wrong?”

Rose was already thinking pragmatically. Or rather, she was just acting as she always did. She was our master’s shield. She only ever thought of one thing, and that was an unshakable truth.

Her steadfast nature had an immediate effect on everyone present.

“Right... Yeah, you’re right.”

If anxiety was contagious, then the opposite was also true, especially when we had a common goal. Rose had given us a reliable direction to go in, and the atmosphere in the room clearly changed. I was no exception.

“Hee hee...”

I was reminded of the time the still-nameless white arachne had abducted our master. Rose had also saved us back then. She was the precious and cute little sister of whom I was so proud. She was always the reliable one when it came down to it.

“Okay. Then let’s think about what we’re gonna do,” I said, smiling at Rose.

“Yes.” Rose nodded.

Without a moment’s delay, Katou cut to the chase. “In general, we can either counterattack, run away, or try to negotiate.”

It was as if she’d known it’d end up like this, or that she’d believed it would.

“What do you think we should do, Katou?” I asked.

“Counterattacking will be pretty tough,” she answered immediately.

“Thought so...”

There was no miraculous method that could strengthen our forces. We couldn’t put up a fight, so we had no choice but to avoid battle.

“That leaves either running or negotiating. It’d be nice if we could just talk things out, but...” I grimaced at the thought. “So long as they’re in cahoots with Travis, who picked a fight with us for no reason, that’s also out of the question.”

“No, I wonder about that,” Katou said. “They might not really be

conspiring with Travis.”

“What do you mean?”

“Travis’s objective was to defeat the Wicked Monster Tamer so that he could get honor and glory. But what about the margrave? It just doesn’t seem worth it for him.”

Katou fiddled with her pigtails as she continued to voice her thoughts.

“Shiran’s theory that five thousand soldiers are necessary to defeat Majima-senpai makes plenty of sense. But what about the cost for such an expedition? Unlike Travis, who was free to deploy the knights in his company however he liked, the margrave has to shoulder the costs of an expedition himself. No matter how wealthy he is, he can’t just whip out a sum like that at a moment’s notice.”

She shot a look at Shiran, who nodded in return.

“That’s...certainly true. You make a good point, Mana. An army eats up expenses even during times of peace. An expedition consumes far more. If this were within his own territory, it’d be a different matter. According to the rumors, the fake savior has been wreaking havoc, so it would be perfectly natural for him to take action to eliminate them. But this is Aker. With such poor relations with us, the margrave has nothing to gain.”

It wasn’t worth it. I hadn’t thought of it from that perspective. In that case...

“Then the provincial army really is an ‘army of justice’ here to subjugate the fake savior?”

Now that I thought of it, I didn’t know much about the margrave himself, but the man in charge of his army, Louis Bard, had a strong sense of justice—according to Iino. I wasn’t sure whether her judgment of him was trustworthy, but at the very least, she’d felt something in him that resonated with her own sense of justice.

If so, maybe Louis Bard was working with false information, much like Iino had been when she attacked us. It was possible and would be a serious nuisance, but if that was the case, then there was also a faint glimmer of hope.

“If the Maclaurin Provincial Army is dancing to Travis’s tune,” I said, “we might be able to avoid a battle by correcting the misunderstanding. We can start by running away, and in the meantime...”

“Let’s borrow Prince Philip’s strength,” Shiran finished for me. “It’s a little different from what we planned, but it’s ultimately the same. The provincial army can’t ignore the words of royalty. Adolf, what is Prince Philip doing now?”

“He should be on his way to meet with His Majesty to discuss the relationship we wish to establish with Takahiro. I’m sure he’ll receive

news of the provincial army's transgression on the way, though. This is Prince Philip we're talking about. He could already be on the move."

"Then, could you ask Prince Philip to try and undo this misunderstanding while we run away and try to buy time?"

"Of course," Adolf answered with a reliable nod.

"I don't know who this fake is, but Takahiro is a real savior," Shiran asserted. "He's not deserving of such slander. Prince Philip has already promised to cooperate with regards to the Holy Order's Fourth Company. We must inform him."

With that, we had a plan. We couldn't deny the possibility that the margrave was scheming something, but even if he was, buying time was a valid strategy. Either way, if we could somehow tide things over, it would work out one way or another.

I lowered my gaze to my sleeping master. I stared lovingly at his face, illuminated by the white light of healing magic. I would protect him. With everyone's strength put together, we could overcome this crisis.

Now that we had a plan, we all nodded. And just as we were about to set things in motion...

"Wait, slime."

A woman's deep voice resounded from the doorway as the door opened. An enormous gray figure slipped into the room. My eyes shot open.

"B-Berta?!"

Yes. Standing there was none other than the two-headed wolf Berta. Having apparently followed her here, Ayame was also by her side.

"Y-You startled me. You came back?"

Berta had accompanied us on our travels for a while, but she'd returned to her master Kudou Riku's side. She'd said she would come back our way, but I never thought she'd show up with this kind of timing.

"I'm surprised you got into the village. Did Gerbera let you through? Oh, never mind. I guess that doesn't matter right now." I took a second to organize my thoughts. "Listen to me, Berta. Things are really bad."

Her position was complicated due to her allegiance to her own king, but Berta was trustworthy. I knew how strong she was too. It would be reassuring to have her help.

"To get right to the point—"

"I know," Berta said, cutting me off and skillfully closing the door with a tentacle. "The Maclaurin Provincial Army is closing in, right?"

She walked to the middle of the room, looked at my master, and

groaned quietly. I could hear a tinge of regret in her utterance.

“Things have gotten rather troublesome here, I see...”

“Y-Yeah.”

“I heard the last parts of your conversation already,” Berta said, turning one of her snouts my way. “Your prediction is on the mark.”

“Huh?”

“The Maclaurin Provincial Army is on the move for the sake of justice. There’s no mistaking that.”

“H-How can you know...?” I asked, thrown off by hearing this from her.

“I saw it.”

She saw it? What could she possibly have seen?

“I have something to tell you.”

She apparently hadn’t simply returned to us. After giving it some thought, I realized it was strange for her to show up here. My master’s relationship with Kudou Riku was kept hidden. It was better to avoid being seen talking to Berta like this whenever possible, yet she boldly showed herself. That meant she had a reason to do so. All eyes gathered on her as she opened her mouth once more.

“It’s about the provincial army, and about the fake savior.”

Chapter 15: The Skanda's Hard-Fought Battle ~Iino Yuna's POV~

Kudou Riku and all his servants vanished from sight. He even took the corpses of the former exploration team members. There wasn't a single trace of his presence left. Now alone and standing atop the cliff, I clenched my fists.

I hadn't been able to do anything. I'd had a terrific chance to catch the culprit behind the attack on Fort Tilia, but he'd slipped out from under my nose. No... It was more like he'd let me go. Kudou had no reason to overlook me, so maybe he just didn't like the idea of what losses he'd suffer having to clash with the Skanda. Whatever it was, it saved me.

"I don't have the time to feel down about it."

Kudou claimed he had nothing to do with the fake savior, but I didn't know if he was telling the truth. It was possible he was just trying to confuse me. It was also possible that rushing to the village the monsters were swarming would set off a trap made just for me.

Still, there was one thing I knew for sure: that village was in danger. I didn't have time to worry about it being a trap.

"I'll definitely make it in time! To do that—!"

This cliff looked over the village. Going down and around would take too much time. I jumped without hesitation.

"Guh?!"

No matter how sturdy my body now was, it had its limits. The cliff was high enough I could die if I handled it wrong. I was prepared for that, though.

"This is nothing!"

I managed to kick the cliff's face to slow my descent. That still wasn't enough, so I plunged into a nearby tree to cushion my fall.

"Urkl!"

Thunderous cracking sounds echoed from all around, and broken branches and leaves fell to the floor with me. I immediately got back to my feet. My joints hurt from my reckless action, but I had no time to waste. I paid the pain no mind and ran.

I wasn't sure if I would make it. No... I had to make it. I kept telling myself I would. I was the Skanda. I was the fastest in the exploration team. How could I not make it? I ran as fast as I could, advancing like a rocket and leaving all of creation behind me.

“There!”

I spotted a monster in my path. It was just a few seconds away. I maintained my speed.

“Aaaaah!”

I roared and slashed. I felt resistance in my sword-wielding hand, but I pushed right through. Backed by my speed, my sword tore apart the bug monster’s sturdy body as if it were paper. However, more than one monster blocked my path.

“Out of my way!”

I caught up, stepped in, and swung. Every time I repeated those actions, a monster fell to the ground. I was quite literally opening a path. I knew I was being reckless, but not unreasonably so. In this world, emotions became strength. If Kudou Riku had acquired his power through his hatred for humanity, then I was the opposite. I’d acquired a power that far surpassed all common sense so that I could become the sword of judgment that cut down all evil.

I had no reason to hesitate. Regardless of whether Kudou was lying or telling the truth, the damage done by the fake savior was undeniable. There was clearly some form of malice behind it. I couldn’t forgive that. I wouldn’t forgive that. So long as that emotion remained within me, I wouldn’t bend, give in, or break. That was who I was—the Skanda Iino Yuna. No matter what happened, I wasn’t going to stop.

“Aaaah!”

I cut and cut and cut again, piercing my way through the swarm of monsters.

“Guh! Hah!”

A wall suddenly obscured my sight.

“I made it!”

I was just in time. Monsters were attacking the walls, but they hadn’t made it inside yet.

“Okay! Now I just have to—!”

I dug my heels into the ground to stop myself and fixed my grip on my blood-soaked sword. My wrist was in pain, and my fingers were numb. I’d exhausted a fair bit of stamina by rushing in at full speed. My breathing was ragged. My heart was noisily pounding away, the sound irritating in my ears.

Nevertheless, I had more than enough strength left to fight. If I could defeat all of the monsters outside the walls, I could prevent any and all casualties. I just had to defeat all...

“Ah.”

That was the very moment my thoughts caught back up to reality. The blood drained from my face as I realized it was hopeless. The swarm of monsters surged against the walls like a dense fog, one that

would instantly crush even a cheater around the level of an average warrior.

But I had a nickname. I also specialized in hand-to-hand combat. Even if I faced hundreds of monsters, I could annihilate them to the last. Nevertheless, that wasn't equivalent to turning the tide. On the contrary, specializing in hand-to-hand combat meant the exact opposite. It was a simple matter of efficiency.

For example, take Watanabe, who'd gone to Fort Tilia with me. He specialized in magic, so he could have eradicated the monsters using a large-scale magic attack. But I couldn't use magic. I had to defeat the monsters one by one.

Even if I could kill one every second, it would still take several minutes to eliminate the hundreds of monsters that were attacking the village. Some would take more than one strike to defeat, so in reality, it would take even longer than that. With that much time, the monsters would make it into the village.

For the average soldier of this world to even consider taking on a monster I could easily defeat, the village's defensive walls were indispensable. If only a few monsters got into a village this size, the whole place would be done for.

"Gah... Hah..."

Faced with this hopeless situation, I gasped for breath. In this world, emotions became strength. Wasn't that supposed to be the case? Were my feelings not strong enough? Was that why I had failed to stop this tragedy?

"Aaaaaah!"

That...can't be...!

That can't be!

I screamed to shake off the cold chill running down my back, and it sounded as though it came from someone else. I cut my way through the monsters as if trying to run from this horrible premonition.

The sword in my hand felt as unreliable as a broken stick. Every step I took felt as if I were sinking farther into an endless darkness.

Aah, I get it now. I can't change the future.



"That's...the last of them!"

I wheezed for breath as I pulled my sword out of a monster's head. How many had I cut down? The magic sword that was supposed to be a masterwork from a past savior's era had long been dulled and smeared in blood. The defensive walls of the village were covered in monster corpses. Nothing moved except for me.

"Ah..."

My knees buckled. Exhaustion dominated my entire being. My head was in a daze, and my brain wasn't getting enough oxygen. Sprinting at full speed versus jogging made a huge difference when covering the same distance. Normally, I would've been able to fight more calmly, but this time I'd prioritized completely annihilating monsters as fast as possible, so I hadn't thought of what came afterward. Nevertheless, I didn't make it in time. It was completely hopeless.

"No. I still...have to fight..."

Several monsters I hadn't been able to reach had made it over the walls and into the village. There were surely others I hadn't seen on the other side of the village from where I was. It was easy to imagine what was happening inside.

"Gah..."

I looked up at the walls before me. Things were different from the ghost towns I'd seen up until now. What happened on the other side was a direct result of my weakness.

"A-Aah..."

My knees trembled, but not because of exhaustion.

I'm scared. I don't want to see it.

Fear bound my limbs. I'd used all my strength and done everything I could, yet I couldn't do anything. There was no helping it. There was always the possibility that things would remain out of reach in situations like this, and I thought I'd resolved myself for that already.

But somewhere in my head, I'd thought I could do something about it one way or another. This was the punishment for my optimism. The shock was too much for my heart. It was also a first for me. After coming to this world, I'd failed a few times, and I'd been too late before, but I'd never lost anything out of my reach right before my eyes. I'd never witnessed a tragedy resulting from my own weakness.

"Ah..."

My breathing became shallow. I felt dizzy. A desire to run away crushed my heart. At the same time, a certain someone's face came to mind. This world was cruel. Did living in such a harsh world without a power like mine mean constantly facing such fear? If so, that was why he was always so desperate.

"Ugh..."

A pathetic groan rang in my throat. I slapped my trembling knees.

"G-Gah!"

I tried to stand back up. I staggered but still got to my feet. I wasn't really thinking of anything; I was merely spurred by my sense of responsibility to see things through to the end. Had the reality of

failing to protect something given birth to desperation? Was I simply trying to escape reality, hoping that someone was still alive? Or maybe... No, it didn't matter.

I did as the unreliable impulse in my heart desired and jumped. I landed on top of the wooden walls and looked down at the village on the other side. And there...

"Huh?"

I didn't see the hell I was expecting.

"Are those...knights?"

Was I dreaming? A formation of knights faced down the monsters who'd gotten into the village. For a second, I thought it was Gordon and his men; they wore the same armor, after all. This was the Holy Order, and the knights were protecting the village. The battle went on as I stood there in disbelief.

The knights took on individual monsters in small groups, skillfully manipulating the battlefield to do so. They readied their shields, blocked attacks, found openings, and counterattacked. Their method wasn't flashy, but a sound and steady approach to battle. It demonstrated their tremendous amount of experience.

Be it by sword or magic, a single counterattack couldn't defeat a monster, but with enough repetition, their tactic worked. A monster ape covered in blue fur, fighting somewhat close to where I stood, couldn't withstand the constant barrage of magic and fell back.

"Leave the rest to us!"

That was when another group charged in with swords at the ready.

"They're...?!"

I gasped as an enormous swell of mana rose from their bodies.

"Ooooh!"

The sword had enough power behind it to crush a rock. I was familiar with this sight—a strength that defied common sense. With the support of the Holy Order, the group steadily defeated the monsters one after another.

"No way." I doubted my eyes. "They're...from the exploration team?"

They were definitely former members of the exploration team, and there were three of them at that.

But that was odd. Jinguuji had told me that three former members were here, but Kudou had killed two of them. One was possibly still alive, but I hadn't heard anything about any other visitors in the area.

So what was going on? I stood in a daze as the monsters fell in front of my eyes. Before long, the fighting came to an end.

Chapter 16: The Skanda's Questions

~Iino Yuna's POV~

Shortly after the unexpected anticlimax, the battle came to an end. I watched it all the way through, in a daze the whole time. I was feeling extremely fatigued, but that was also because all the tension that'd been hanging over me snapped at once.

My head was throbbing as if I had a terrible cold. I couldn't get enough oxygen. There was no blood in my face. It felt like my stomach was empty, yet it also felt as if what was inside was trying to come back out.

"Iino...? Hey! It's Iino!"

I felt like I was going to pass out, but just around the time the last monster fell, the former exploration team members noticed me. They all jumped up onto the walls next to me.

"I thought it was weird. Not that many monsters made their way in. I didn't think you were fighting for us outside!"

"Umm, you're...Hebiiwa Keigo, right?"

My brain wasn't working right, so it took me a second to remember his name.

"That's right. So you remember me."

Hebiiwa was one year younger than me. The boy and girl who were with him were also first years. I didn't have any sort of connection to them, but we'd at least spoken a few times before this. The three of them beamed at me with innocent smiles.

"You really surprised us! You were holding them back, right?"

"Whoa! Amazing! There's a ton of dead monsters outside!"

"This many all on your own? That's Iino for you!"

The battle had only just ended, so they were all a little excited. They all praised me, leaving me no opening to cut in. Not that I had the composure to say anything. I was exhausted.

The knights of the Holy Order came over soon after.

"Well done, Mister Keigo. Who is this, by the way?"

"Right, let me introduce you. This is Iino Yuna, one of the exploration team's upper brass."

"Ooh, so this is the famous Skanda of the exploration team! You've told me about her before!"

"It looks like she was fighting outside the village. Come on, take a look."

Hebiiwa's words were overflowing with genuine respect, and the knight speaking with him was the same. However, listening to them made my throat feel disgustingly dry for some reason.

"A-All this on her own?!" the knight exclaimed.

"It surprised me too," Hebiiwa replied. "The rumors are true... No, this is well beyond the rumors."

"You three played an active role too."

"All's well that ends well."

"Listen up, everyone!" the knight called. "The crisis is over thanks to the hard efforts of these great saviors!"

"Inform all the villagers!"

"Hail the saviors!"

The knights cheered in chorus. Hearing them, the villagers who'd been hiding in the houses started coming out one after the other. They looked up our way, their eyes filled with hope.

An unpleasant sensation crawled up my throat. I'd only realized how powerless I truly was moments ago. I wasn't so impudent that I could accept such praise shortly after.

"P-Please wait a moment."

Unable to bear it, I cut in. Because of my horrible headache, the simple act of speaking felt like stabbing a knife into my brain. Still, thanks to that, the haze that had been clouding my thoughts cleared up.

"What's the matter, Iino?" Hebiiwa asked, his young-looking face steeped in concern. "You're looking pretty pale. Sorry, I didn't notice. You fought that many monsters, so I'm sure you're tired. You should get some—"

"I'm all right, Hebiiwa." I refused the hand he offered me. There was something I had to get to first. "More importantly, I need to ask you something. Why is the Holy Order here?"

I'd known that former exploration team members would be in this village, but nobody had said anything about the Holy Order.

"Oh, that? Well, I guess it does seem strange, huh?" Hebiiwa said, nodding. "We've actually been chasing rumors of the fake savior."

"The fake savior...?"

"Yeah. After we left the exploration team, we made our way to the imperial capital. There were others who did the same. We were under the care of the Holy Church there. One day, we got a request to help investigate these rumors of a fake savior."

Not all former members of the exploration team were in this region. Over sixty people had left the team after we'd reached Fort Ebenus. A fair number of them had gone to the imperial capital, which was basically the center of this world.

It was standard for visitors to be invited to the capital and fight as

saviors. Hebiiwa's group basically fell into this category and had agreed to help investigate the fake savior.

"That's what brought you here?" I asked.

"Yeah. We accepted right away," he answered, puffing out his chest. "We're saviors, after all. We gotta help people in need."

He showed no hesitation as he spoke. I was a little surprised. I didn't know he had such a strong sense of justice. The other two nodded. These three obviously got along well.

"That's basically it," Hebiiwa continued, throwing a look at the knights. "That's how we ended up coming here with the knights of the Holy Order's First Company."

"The First Company? Meaning you got word from the Second Company?"

"Huh? How do you know that?"

Hebiiwa looked confused, but I was starting to see the bigger picture.

"I've been traveling with the Second Company," I said. "We've also been chasing the fake savior."

"Aah, that's why."

The First and Second Company were both investigating this incident together, but we'd only decided on our destination yesterday, so neither group had been aware of each other's movements. That was normal, considering how slow communication was in this world.

"I understand," I said with a nod. "It's a shame the culprit in question got away, then."

Hebiiwa's group had come all the way here looking for the fake savior, but it had been in vain. Things would've ended had I captured Kudou Riku, but I hadn't been able to. I had to inform them of this and exchange what information we had.

Oh, I also had to tell them of the two dead exploration team members. It was a heavy topic, but it was my responsibility as the one who failed to accomplish anything. However, just before I could inform them of this, Hebiiwa cut me off.

"No, he didn't, Iino." A somewhat-proud air floated behind his innocent smile. "We caught the fake savior."

"Huh...? You...caught him?"

I was flabbergasted. I couldn't understand what he said.

"Yes. Well, it was the knights who caught him."

He spoke like he didn't have a care in the world. It wasn't a lie or a joke, and that just made it all the more confusing.

"H-Hang on, the knights caught him?"

"Yeah. We weren't there when it happened, so we only got the report afterward. Uhh, is something wrong?"

"You weren't there?" Things were making less and less sense. "So

you're saying the knights caught Kudou Riku all on their own?"

That was impossible. He was the Lord of Darkness. Just moments ago, I had to let him get away. Me, the Skanda, a cheater with a nickname. However, Hebiiwa's response just confused me more.

"Kudou? What's this got to do with Kudou?" he asked, blinking in confusion.

"I mean, Kudou Riku is the fake savior, so..."

"What makes you say that?"

"Huh?"

We looked at each other in bewilderment. What was going on? We weren't getting through to each other, and something felt off. It was a mess. Was one of us misunderstanding something? If so, what?

"The Holy Order caught the fake savior, and it isn't Kudou Riku?"

This was completely different from what I knew, but that was what Hebiiwa was saying. I suddenly recalled my conversation with Kudou.

"This is this, that is that... Not that it seems like you'll listen to me."

He'd denied laying a hand on the former exploration team members. What's more, he'd claimed that this incident with the village had nothing to do with him. If he'd been lying, would he have made such a poor excuse?

Did that mean he acted like that precisely because he was telling the truth? If so... No, that couldn't be right. I denied that thought. I mean, it'd be weird if that was the case. If Kudou had nothing to do with this village, then what was with all the monsters?

Things weren't matching up. Kudou had just been spouting random lies. I couldn't think of any other possibility. But if Kudou was the fake savior, who was the one they captured in this village? I had to think. Who was in this village to begin with?

"No way..."

I reached my answer and groaned. If I was right, I couldn't let it be. I closed in on Hebiiwa in a fluster.

"Hebiiwa! Where is the fake savior right now?!"

"Huh? Wh-What's this all of a sudden?" he asked, his eyes darting about.

"Just answer me!"

"U-Uhh... We didn't catch him or anything, so I don't know for sure. I heard he was to be escorted right away to— Hey! Iino?!"

I started moving before he'd even finished. I ran across the wall that encircled the village. It was a small village, so the gate quickly came into sight. I saw someone being led to a manamobile parked nearby—a criminal. He had a white cloth covering his head and was surrounded by knights.

"Wait right there!"

I suppressed my headache and my urge to vomit and leaped from the wall. I landed like a bullet right in front of the knights.

“Wh-What?!”

A whirlwind of sand kicked up, and the knights covered their faces in shock. The white cloth that had been covering the criminal’s face also flew up in the air.

“Ah...”

Our eyes met. He was a boy with black hair and eyes. It was just as I thought.

“Kouzu.”

I called his name, and the boy’s sunken eyes widened slightly.

“Iino?”

Kouzu Asahi. He was a former exploration team member. He was a second year like me, so I’d talked with him quite a lot during our time in the exploration team. He was the fake savior they’d arrested.

I never thought that both a real and fake savior would be in the same village at the same time. If they’d caught a fake savior who wasn’t Kudou Riku, then this kind of misunderstanding was entirely possible. Of the three former exploration team members staying in this village, two had been killed. The third had been mistaken for the fake savior.

“Miss Iino?”

I reunited with one other person in this moment. One of the knights had spoken up, a woman who gave off an air of wisdom. I remembered her.

“Umm, we met before, right?” I asked.

“Yes. My name is Eleanor. I apologize for the discourtesy I showed the other day.”

She was the female knight I’d met in one of the destroyed villages that had fallen victim to the fake savior. I’d been mistaken for the fake, and she’d drawn her sword on me. It was some strange fate that I now witnessed her mistaking another visitor as a fake savior.

I’d managed to get by without a problem because Gordon knew who I was. Here, I knew who Kouzu was. The situation was very similar.

“Lady Eleanor, we’ll talk about that later. For now...I’m glad I made it in time.”

I ran over to Kouzu. I placed my hands on his shoulders and peered into his eyes. He looked exhausted. That only made sense if he’d been falsely accused. Seeing my weakened comrade, some strength returned to my own withered body. I looked back to the knights surrounding us.

“Please listen to me. He isn’t the fake savior.”

“Are you saying he’s real?” Eleanor asked.

Her expression was stern. There was a certain pressure behind her eyes that nearly made me falter.

“That’s right,” I said, returning her gaze head-on. I would protect my comrades. I had no intention of yielding a single step. “He’s a savior just like me.”

Even if Eleanor obstinately stuck to her misunderstanding, I planned to firmly object to the end. I’d sworn to myself that I would. However, that resolve was crushed from an unexpected direction.

“You’re wrong...”

“Huh?”

I staggered and gasped, stupefied. I’d been pushed aside. My body was weak after having fought for so long, but it was more because I hadn’t expected it whatsoever. It was unbelievable. The person who’d pushed me aside stared back at me.

“Kouzu...?”

“You’re wrong.”

He was hoarse. I felt a sudden chill. Kouzu’s face was vacant. It was as though he were a corpse who’d just gotten back up.

“You’re wrong. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!”

He screamed. He tore at his hair and kept yelling his denial. His hair came out, and his nails dug through his skin. He didn’t stop even as blood flowed down his head. I was petrified by his mad behavior.

“I’m not a savior!” Kouzu screamed, his voice sounding as if it came from the depths of despair. “I’m nothing like a savior!”

And then he collapsed to the ground. I couldn’t do anything but stare down at his back. I couldn’t understand what was going on. I couldn’t make sense of the scene before me.

Someone please tell me what the heck is going on.

Chapter 17: A Dazzling Savior

In this world, where mana was a real thing, emotions affected reality. When a strong emotion surpassed a certain point, when one harbored a wish deep within their soul, a visitor's inherent ability would manifest. Fundamentally, everyone possessed a unique ability that was based on their own wish.

However, those of the exploration team called warriors were a different story. They had no inherent abilities; they simply had an extreme talent for fighting. Kudou Riku had once called these cheaters failures who hadn't reached their potential. That was because they hadn't gained power from a wish. Instead, it had come from groundless conviction.

Groundless conviction was no different from a strong unconscious emotion. "I came to this world, so maybe I'm special. No, I *am* special. It must be true." That was the source of their superhuman strength—the reason for their hollow, emotionless power.

Much like Kudou Riku had said, the power they'd all drawn from that groundless conviction was generally identical. Nevertheless, even with that commonality, they obviously had their own individual personalities.

"Asahi, you really lack a personal drive sometimes."

That was what the exploration team's leader, Nakajima Kojirou, had once said to Kouzu Asahi. Asahi didn't remember when and where he'd said it, though. It had been nothing more than a casual conversation.

"Find a purpose, think of it seriously, determine what needs to be done, and take decisive action. Well, that doesn't only apply to you, Asahi. What I mean is, be a bit more passionate. If you do, I'm sure you'll have more fun."

Nakajima Kojirou had a tendency to give sermons like this once in a while. He was just considering his fellow students, but it really came across as stuffy. In a sense, it was one of their respected leader's lovable flaws. Whenever the exploration team members were treated to such a sight, they couldn't help but smile wryly.

"There he goes running his mouth again," Asahi had thought to himself at the time. On the other hand, he'd never forgotten those words. Maybe he actually understood. Kouzu Asahi was the type to get swept up in the flow of things. He was somewhat self-aware of this

and kind of figured Nakajima recognized that about him too.

He was impressed that the leader knew him so well, but that didn't mean Asahi had tried to change. Not only had he not tried, the idea hadn't even occurred to him. It was his carefree nature that set his destination to the small noble territories in the southern Empire.

The only reason Asahi left the exploration team was because his two good friends had invited him. He had no strong inclination either way. All he had was the sense that he should save people in need and that his efforts carried the hopes of others. This wasn't unique to Asahi either. His two friends were the same, and so they'd set out on their carefree journey.

As saviors, they were welcomed warmly in every village they visited. All they had to do was kick about the nearby monsters, and cheers would follow them everywhere. Just by taking a stroll around the area and bringing back the monsters they'd defeated, they'd hear, "O saviors! O great saviors!" It was so easy to become a hero.

If there was one difference between Asahi and his two friends, it was how Asahi's attention had suddenly shifted to certain details.

He saw a child who didn't know the face of his parents.

He saw a woman who grieved over the death of her lover.

He saw an old man who mourned the loss of his entire family.

Naturally, as a member of the first expeditionary force who'd stayed in Fort Ebenus, Asahi had heard from the nobles of this region about the threat the monsters posed to their citizens. He was supposed to know all this already, yet he now knew he'd only pretended to know.

It was a little messed up, but only by meeting the villagers did he realize that they were people living in these lands just like he was. He hadn't had the imagination to understand that before. Still, he wasn't some immature child who felt no sympathy for the people right in front of him. Their sorrow resonated with his heart, and their suffering affected his emotions. He had to do something.

"Ooh! It's a savior! A savior is here!"

"Please save us!"

"Grant us a life where we need not spend our days in fear!"

"Please! Great savior!"

People were asking for his help, and he had enough power to become a hero with ease. So what was he to do? What did he want to do?

"Asahi, you really lack a personal drive sometimes."

That was when their leader's words had come back to him.

"Well, this doesn't only apply to you, Asahi. What I mean is, be a bit more passionate. If you do, I'm sure you'll have more fun."

Aah, *that* was what he'd meant. That was when Asahi had figured

it out. Therefore...

"All right. It's about time to get going," Asahi said to his two friends, Itsuki Yuta and Momii Yoshihiro.

"Yeah." In contrast to Asahi's enthusiasm, they were so carefree. "Well, I say that, but it's hard to hype myself up for this."

"No kidding."

The two of them laughed. Unlike Asahi, they didn't show much interest in the villagers' plight. Not that this was much of a problem.

"But, well, they asked us, so I guess we gotta do it."

"Yup."

In the end, they found their own motivation. They didn't mind that the villagers were depending on them as saviors. They were in a good mood, good enough to even tease their friend.

"Anyways, you sure are fired up about this stuff recently, Asahi. You were the same in the last village too."

"Yeah, you were the first to charge out and beat up those monsters."

"I wonder if it's gonna start pouring tomorrow or something."

"Ugh. I seriously hope not. I don't wanna get drenched. Spare us that, Asahi."

"Piss off."

They bantered and screwed around, but Asahi didn't deny his own enthusiasm. What they said was true. He felt a heat in his chest that he'd never known before, and it was urging him onward. It was an unfamiliar sensation, but it wasn't bad.

"Let's go."

Asahi's group left the house they were borrowing, and the villagers all saw them off. The air was hot with their feverish hopes. Everyone here was absolutely certain that one day, this moment would be recorded in legends. Asahi instinctively knew what all the villagers surrounding them were hoping for, and he wanted to meet their expectations. He drew the sword at his waist and pointed it at the sky.

"Just wait for us!" he yelled to the heavens as if unleashing the heat in his chest. "Today, we will defeat the monsters who've been threatening your lives!"

The villagers cheered wildly and gave their blessings to their heroes. This moment reminded them of the suffering they'd endured, and once they thought of those they'd lost, the tears wouldn't stop.

But that was all going to end today. They cheered themselves hoarse for the saviors who would guarantee them a bright future. Those who would be spoken of in legends were going to grant their wishes.



Such were the details of a certain boy's life so far. Having lived in a carefree manner, he had nothing he could call a passion. However, after witnessing the impoverished for the first time in his life, he wondered if he could do something.

That was why, when the villagers pleaded with him for help, he hadn't hesitated to try and answer their hopes. It was a beautiful sign of growth. It was the moment he found his passion and determination.

That was exactly why the end of his story was so tragic.

"Wh-What the hell?!"

Asahi ran through the forest, gasping for breath.

"Why?!"

His legs tangled up from the exhaustion, and fear paralyzed his limbs. He tumbled to the ground multiple times over, but he clawed the dirt, got back up, and kept running. His dominant arm dangled loosely from its socket, and blood dribbled down his fingers.

It hadn't even been half a day since he'd left the village, yet the shining luster of a dazzling savior was nowhere in sight now. It was such a tragedy. What kind of malice could've brought him so low?

Was it the scheming of a Demon King who manipulated monsters to destroy humanity? Or had he been attacked by a mysterious third party with villainous intent? No, it was neither of those things. It would've been so much better if either had actually happened.

"No! It wasn't supposed to be like this!"

Asahi's face was steeped in regret. His remorse for the actions he'd taken was endless. There was no room to consider anyone else, only enough to curse his own decision. And as harsh as it was, this outcome had been inevitable.

Even Nakajima Kojirou had spoken of this in detail. Asahi should've remembered exactly what his leader had told him.

"Find a purpose, think of it seriously, determine what needs to be done, and take decisive action. Well, this doesn't only apply to you, Asahi. What I mean is, be a bit more passionate. If you do, I'm sure you'll have more fun."

If he'd properly listened, maybe he would've realized. Asahi had, in fact, been spurred by passion to answer the hopes of the villagers who sought salvation, but he was just doing what they'd asked. His own thoughts weren't a part of it. He had no personal will; he'd merely been stirred by emotion. So how was that any different from going with the flow? Had he only given it a little more thought, maybe it would've ended differently.

What the villagers wished for, what Kouzu Asahi regretted taking on, was the total subjugation of the monsters living in the neighboring



If there was anything to sympathize with, it was Kouzu Asahi's ignorance. He didn't know the meaning behind the appraisal that a savior's power was worth a thousand soldiers. He didn't understand why knights always accompanied saviors in the legends.

Kouzu Asahi hadn't acquired any of the knowledge that Majima Takahiro had learned from traveling with Shiran, or that Iino Yuna had gathered from traveling with the Imperial Knights and the Holy Order. That was why he hadn't given the task any thought and had simply done as he was asked. That was the cause of this tragedy.

Villages in the vicinity of Dark Woods were always troubled by monsters and the damage they caused. It was natural they wished for better safety. Villagers also knew that saviors of the past had conquered several Dark Woods, so of course they'd assume that the savior before them could do the same.

Asahi and his friends had gone out believing they could do it too. To them, it was just beating up some pesky monsters. But they were mistaken. Saviors had powers far beyond normal, but they weren't invincible. Having the strength of a thousand men meant that one savior could be equaled by gathering a thousand soldiers.

This logic applied to a swarm of monsters too, which was why knights always accompanied the saviors. They strengthened the saviors' defenses so that the world didn't lose a font of power greater than what was humanly possible. When it came to conquering the Dark Woods, they had to be even more cautious than usual.

That said, a simple villager wouldn't know any of this. To them, saviors were absolute. Besides, some had witnessed saviors casually beating up monsters in one-on-one fights. The average villager had no way of knowing what a savior was capable of. The villagers said they could do it, so things would work out one way or another if they just did as they were told.

The outcome should've been clear as day. After challenging the Dark Woods, Asahi and his two friends were forced to retreat. It was a pathetic and utterly crushing defeat, but that wasn't the end of their story. Their actions opened the door to an even greater hell. The situation was very similar to the savior's campaign into the Abyss five hundred years ago.

Monsters attacked humans. The terrifying part of fighting where a great many monsters lived was that the tumult of battle would attract more monsters. If one dealt with them too slowly, their numbers would multiply until they became an uncontrollable landslide. That was exactly what had happened here.

Running away after the fact wouldn't stop the landslide. It swelled up, surged out, and crushed everything in its path. Nothing could be done at that point. The only thing they could do was desperately try and save their own lives. That was how Itsuki Yuta and Momii Yoshihiro had gotten away.

"W-We somehow made it..."

They'd gotten caught in the surging wave of monsters coming from the Dark Woods and had barely survived. Itsuki had a deep gash in his right shoulder, while Momii had one across his back. Still, because of their sturdy warrior muscles, their wounds weren't fatal.

"I thought I was gonna die..." Momii said, sighing in relief.

"Dumbass. Like hell we're gonna die. But man, fuck, this hurts," Itsuki said as he held his shoulder.

"Oh yeah, what happened to Asahi?" Momii suddenly asked.

"Hell if I know. Fuck. He ran off in the middle of all of this saying the village was in danger."

"The village?"

Momii's tired expression went taut. Now that monsters were surging from the Dark Woods, the neighboring village was in danger, but they'd only just realized that. The village hadn't even crossed their minds until now.

"Isn't that...really bad?" Momii said.

"But what can we do about it?"

Momii was silent.

"You wanna go help?" Itsuki asked. "Even though we might die?"

"I..."

"Fuck that."

Both of them understood the danger of going back to the village. Just maybe, they could protect the village if they made use of the walls, but it was far more likely that the entire village would be trampled.

With that in mind, the two of them couldn't move anymore. Up until now, they'd only ever acted out of goodwill. They'd defeated many monsters and had contributed to the safety of several villages. These had definitely been good deeds.

However, they'd only done those things when there was no risk to their personal safety. In that sense, their principles were completely different from Iino Yuna's. This wasn't something to criticize them for, of course. Not everyone was capable of throwing their life away for the sake of another. Their "good deeds" had saved people—there was no denying that. Things were different in this case, though. Their approach to fighting the monsters had been nothing but irresponsible.

"We didn't know it'd end up like that. It's not our fault."

"Y-Yeah. It was inevitable... We couldn't do anything."

They were at the end of their rope, so they only needed a few seconds to decide to abandon the village.

“Actually, we’re still not safe here,” Itsuki said, staggering to his feet, his expression stiff. “We don’t know when a monster’s gonna show up. We gotta get as far away as we can.”

“There’s no need for that.”

Just then, another voice joined their conversation. The two of them started and froze in place. They never thought anyone would be all the way out here.

“Who’s there?!”

They had something to feel guilty about and thus reacted more drastically. They’d both lost their weapons, but as warriors, they were enough of a threat barehanded. They could fight to a certain extent.

As they readied themselves for battle, a short boy showed himself.

“It’s me. Watanabe Yoshiki,” he said with a smile.

“Watanabe?!” Itsuki exclaimed.

Watanabe Yoshiki was an exploration team member who’d gone with the Skanda Iino Yuna and Juumonji Tatsuya to Fort Tilia. Itsuki had been on relatively good terms with him, which was exactly why he was perplexed.

“D-Didn’t you die at Fort Tilia?”

“Who said that? I’m alive and kicking, just as you can see.”

The boy shrugged and narrowed his eyes. That gesture perfectly matched the Watanabe that Itsuki knew, so the disparity between what was in front of them and what they’d been told confused them all the more.

“More importantly,” the boy said with a serious look, “things have gotten pretty bad.”

The two boys with guilty consciences jolted. Fortunately, the conversation didn’t delve any deeper in that direction. On the contrary, they heard exactly what they wanted to hear.

“I came to help. The exploration team is with me.”

“R-Really?!”

“Yup. So it’s all right now.”

It was like a dream. They doubted their ears, but reality remained the same. The two exchanged looks and burst into smiles.

“Th-Thanks, Watanabe!”

Itsuki ran to his unexpected hero, so moved that he gave him a handshake.

“It’s no big deal,” the boy said, smiling. “Don’t worry about it. We’re comrades, right?”

This proud smile, one Watanabe had shown sometimes during their time in the exploration team, had never seemed so bright before.



“Y-Yeah. You’re right. We’re comrades.”

“Yup. More importantly...”

The boy’s smile suddenly turned into a puzzled expression. His eyes looked around the area as if searching for something.

“I heard there was one more of you out here.”

“Y-Yeah. You mean Asahi. We split up on the way here. He’s probably headed for the village. I don’t know if he made it, though...”

“I see. That’s unfortunate,” the boy said, sighing.

“B-But he’s not necessarily dead yet!” Itsuki yelled. The danger was past now, so he’d finally remembered to worry about his friend.

“We gotta save him too. I hope he’s still okay...”

“Oh. That’s not what I meant,” the boy said, shattering Itsuki’s all-too-late illusions of a rescue.

“Huh? What do you mean...?”

Itsuki was utterly confused, then one second later, his expression froze.

“I mean, one got away, right?”

“Watanabe Yoshiki”—the boy borrowing his figure, to be precise—thrust a knife into Itsuki’s throat.

“Gah! Hak!”

Itsuki grabbed his neck, crimson droplets bursting through the gaps between his fingers as he fell to his knees.

“You...son of a...”

Maybe he could still resist. A normal person would’ve died from that injury right away. It was a miracle he was able to hang on at all. However, a shadowy sword flew in from the distance and plunged into his back. Weakened as he was, Itsuki had no way of dodging it. He passed out and collapsed.

“Huh...?”

Momii’s eyes shot open in a daze. He couldn’t understand what was going on.

“Wh-What did you do, Watanabe?”

“Oh come on. Think about it. Did you really think something so convenient was happening?”

“Watanabe Yoshiki” then transformed into a shadowy figure.

“A doppelganger...? N-No way...” Momii muttered in disbelief as he stared at the spectacle.

“Correct,” a voice answered him from behind.

Momii turned around stiffly, like a rusty machine. Before him stood a boy surrounded by monsters.

“Kudou Riku...”

Before leaving the exploration team, Momii had heard about the culprit behind Fort Tilia’s attack, so he understood what kind of being

Kudou Riku was. Or perhaps he was made to understand. The moment he came in contact with those inhuman eyes, Momii's throat dried up. He'd never seen anything like it before.

"Seriously. What impressive saviors you lot are. Abandoning the village that's about to be destroyed because of what you've done? Running away from your own responsibilities?"

Momii froze in fear and despair as Kudou started talking to him. Kudou's tone was disinterested and civil, yet beneath that tranquil voice was a dreadful vortex of hatred.

"H-Hang on!"

There was no reason to be optimistic—no convenient outcome to this situation. Momii screamed in desperation.

"I-It was an accident! Yeah! Just an accident! We didn't mean to! I'm serious!"

"I know. You didn't have any ill intent. You're a foolish and weak human like any other. Your only defining trait was being handed power beyond your means."

Kudou hadn't denied what Momii said, but Momii's pleading wasn't enough to overturn his inevitable end.

"That's what makes all of you so cancerous."

Kudou wasn't here to criticize them for bringing a village to the verge of destruction.

"Despite acting like good people all the time, when it really comes down to it, you reveal your hideous nature. You show no shame and sacrifice others for your own sake. You are weak, foolish, banal, and above all else, cancerous."

Momii caught a glimpse of an irrepressible darkness oozing from Kudou's expression. It was more violent than anger, and darker than despair. It was impossible to give a name to such emotion, but that was because it only existed for the Demon King who'd long left the path of humanity—who'd been trampled by the weakness and foolishness born of humanity's evil nature.

"Aah, all of you truly are repulsive."

The Demon King listened to the boy, one who'd failed to become a hero, groan in despair, then declared his death with a fake smile.

"I simply can't forgive such a repulsive sight."

Chapter 18: The Skanda and the Mysterious Man ~Iino Yuna's POV~

"They tried to conquer the Dark Woods, just the three of them...?" I muttered in disbelief.

I was in one of the village's houses. Nearly an hour had passed since I'd reunited with Kouzu. I sat at a table across from Eleanor, who looked at me with tranquil eyes. She was in the middle of telling me everything she'd gotten out of Kouzu.

"Th-That can't be..."

The truth was so unpredictable that it left my head in a daze. This uproar, where an entire village was nearly destroyed, was all caused by Kouzu and his two friends. There was no actual fake savior. If we had to sum it up, the fake savior was actually multiple real saviors who'd left the exploration team.

"You don't believe me?" Eleanor asked.

"It's honestly hard to believe," I said, closing my eyes and letting out a heavy breath. "But...it's probably true."

"You're rather calm. I'm glad you believe me."

"No, I should be the one thanking you for telling me."

Now that everything had come to light, it was obvious the fake savior had been a vague existence all this time. What standard was used to decide they were fake in the first place? It wasn't like the person in question had announced that they were a fake everywhere they went.

The only reason the person who claimed to be a savior was then deemed a fake was because of the tremendous damage that was suffered afterward. The people believed that nothing like that would ever have happened with a real savior. In other words, even if they were a real savior, as long as people died, everyone would believe they were a fake.

I'd thought that Kudou Riku had made the visitors who'd gone to villages out to be fakes, but that was only half-right. He wasn't the one who'd made Kouzu and his friends out to be fakes—they'd done it to themselves. It was just as Kudou said; he had nothing to do with the fake savior incidents.

"But why would they do something so...?" I started to ask, but I suddenly came to a realization. "Never mind. I get it. They didn't even realize it was reckless to begin with. They've never lost before this,

after all.”

Among all the members of the exploration team, I boasted the strongest class of power when it came to combat, but in truth, ever since coming to this world, I'd tasted defeat on three separate occasions. This incident was one of them. Before that was my scuffle with Majima. And the first was just after we arrived in this world.

That first occasion in particular was very close to the situation Kouzu's group had created here. We had scattered to find out what kind of place we'd been teleported to, but we came across monsters. The battle had drawn even more monsters toward us in an endless loop. The entire student body had nearly been annihilated.

During that event, our leader had stood at the front and gathered everyone together, and as a result, the exploration team was formed. None of the members who were there during that initial period would've ever caused this kind of incident. We all knew that things could swell beyond our strength. Unfortunately, Kouzu's group didn't fall into this category.

Well, that wasn't quite right either. The initial members who'd overcome that first crisis tended to strongly identify with the exploration team, likely because of what had happened. To put it another way, many of the people who left the exploration team were those who'd joined after that incident, so they had never experienced a truly dangerous situation.

This was even true for the journey that the first expeditionary force took. We somehow traversed the Woodlands that was rampant with monsters, making our way to Fort Ebenus. We'd had our fair share of hardships, but none of them had required us to resolve ourselves for death. That wasn't a bad thing, of course. How could it be? There was nothing better than being safe with no threat to one's life.

Kouzu's group had always gone forward without issue. Nothing had ever blocked them. They had never failed, and they had never even considered stopping what they were doing. They'd simply sped up and continued forward, so when they tumbled, it ended up being fatal.

“But that's way too cruel. You can't save anyone like that...”

Kouzu, his friends, the villagers... None of them had had any ill intent. Reality was just unkind. It was enough for me to want to plug my ears and pretend the world didn't exist. I couldn't do anything of the sort, though, because I had to confirm something.

“Lady Eleanor. Is this the first—”

“It isn't,” she answered without waiting for me to finish. I felt a sudden tightening in my chest. “We've already confirmed four separate cases. Not all of them were a result of saviors trying to

conquer a Dark Woods, though.”

“Four other cases...”

I felt overwhelmed. If they’d only confirmed four, then it was possible there were many more. Few had tried to recklessly challenge the Dark Woods, but just carelessly trying to suppress monsters could bring about the same results. I put my hand to my temple, holding back the headache that had been bothering me all this time.

“So you’ve been taking everyone into protective custody?” I asked.

“We haven’t done anything so grandiose. The ones who saved Mister Kouzu were Mister Hebiiwa’s group. All we can do is provide the saviors with assistance.” Eleanor paused, then quietly shook her head. “Besides, we didn’t succeed in safeguarding all the saviors who visited the region.”

“Thought so...”

During this incident, Itsuki Yuta and Momii Yoshihiro had lost their lives. It seemed Kudou had been the one to kill them, but in other cases, some had surely been killed by monsters. In that sense, Kouzu was lucky. At the very least, he was still alive.

According to what I’d been told, Kouzu had escaped the Dark Woods and made it all the way to the vicinity of the village, fighting monsters the whole way. However, he’d used up all his strength and had been vastly outnumbered. That was when Hebiiwa and the Holy Order had noticed him.

Kouzu had run away. Not from monsters, but from the eyes of the people.

“I’m not a savior! I’m nothing like a savior!”

He wasn’t trying to claim he was a fake savior or anything. He just denied being a hero. He couldn’t take it anymore. It was clear from his current state that his heart had shattered to pieces.

“What do you intend to do with Kouzu?” I asked.

“We plan on escorting him to the imperial capital. Similar measures have been taken for the other saviors. They are currently receiving treatment for both mind and body. All of them are in pretty much the same shape as he is.”

“Healing the body is simple, but can you really heal their minds? If something can be done with magic, there are plenty of guys in the exploration team who specialize in it. Wouldn’t it be better to consult them?”

“There is no magic to fully heal an emotional scar. Well, strictly speaking, magic is used during treatment to calm the mind and induce sleep. Sadly, none of it heals the mind itself.”

“Magic is nothing more than a tool, then. If so...we really won’t be able to help.”

If magic was useless, we were nothing more than students. There

was nothing we could do. It was better to leave these things to the specialists.

"I understand," I said with a nod, then knitted my brow. "But allow me to ask one thing. Why have you been taking everyone into custody secretly? Sir Gordon's group didn't seem to be aware."

I'd been racking my brain over this problem with the fake savior because Eleanor's group had been keeping this information hidden. Gordon had been in the same predicament as me...in theory. I'd be a bit shocked if he knew and had kept quiet about it.

"He isn't aware. Sir Gordon hasn't been informed."

It wasn't exactly fortunate that this was the case, but Eleanor didn't deny it.

"Mister Hebiiwa's group and the knights accompanying them do not know the truth about the fake savior incidents. It has been decided that only a small portion of the Holy Order's First Company is to deal with this. We need to keep as much of the truth concealed as we can."

"Why's that?"

"With all due respect, the upper brass has decided that these incidents are far too bad for your reputations."

"You mean to say it's for Kouzu and all the others?"

"That is the most important reason, but if pushed to say more, we cannot disregard the effect it will have on the populace. If it were well-known that saviors had not only been defeated by monsters, but had caused the annihilation of several settlements, public unrest could spread like wildfire."

"H-Huh? Public unrest? Is it really that bad?"

"It is," Eleanor declared immediately. "We have just barely managed to establish a livelihood in this world. Our forces on the front suffer from constant attrition, especially when there are no saviors present. Drops in morale lead directly to the front line receding."

"Th-That bad..."

It all felt too exaggerated for me. Having said that, it did make sense. If we were the cause of a negative influence, it was better to take some countermeasures. The ones who'd lost their lives were the soldiers fighting on the front, after all.

"We cannot allow the saviors' reputation to be clouded," Eleanor continued. "Nonetheless, we cannot hide the truth that villages have been destroyed. That's why we've made use of the already spreading rumors of a fake savior. This wasn't the doing of a savior. It was all because of a fake."

"So that's what it all means..."

I let out a deep sigh. This was a full-on propaganda campaign to conceal the truth. Honestly, it made me grimace a little. Not that there

was anything to gain by bringing the truth to light. It would only make things worse. This was also for the sake of the students who'd caused these incidents. I couldn't object.

"I'm glad you've come to understand," Eleanor said, bowing.

With that, I now knew the entire truth of the fake savior incidents.



I ended up staying in the village for the night. Eleanor's group had already taken Kouzu away. Gordon managed to make it, but I said I wasn't feeling well as an excuse to stay cooped up in my room.

I was pretty exhausted from this afternoon's battle, so it wasn't a complete lie. Still, if pushed to say it, I just wanted to be alone. I wanted time to process the reality of the situation. My journey to investigate the fake savior rumors was over. I knew the truth. I had no more business in this region, so I planned to leave the village the following morning.

My next destination was the Margraviate of Maclaurin, where I'd meet back up with the exploration team and inform our leader of what I'd learned. But surely it was okay for me to get some rest tonight. I put out the light, placed a chair by the open window, and took a seat. I rested my chin on the windowsill and looked up at the sky.

As I did, unwanted thoughts invaded my mind. Why had the former members done all that? There had been no malice behind these incidents; they'd actually been tragedies born of goodwill. I had no idea how to accept the truth, and I squeezed my hand tight in front of my heart.

I was shaken for sure. I believed we could simply crush all evil. After all, that was the reason the power within me existed. But what was I supposed to do when that approach didn't apply?

I felt incredibly insecure. I let out a sigh—then suddenly narrowed my eyes. I changed gears in an instant, steeling myself for danger.

"I'm being watched...?"

I felt eyes on me. I looked around, but I couldn't spot anyone. All I could see was the village enveloped by night. There were no late-night businesses like in modern Japan, so nobody was walking around outside. To be more specific, it wasn't a passerby's gaze; someone was hiding and watching me. Someone suspicious was out there.

A normal girl would probably be seized with fear. I, on the other hand, immediately placed my foot on the windowsill, ready to drag them out and capture them.

"Over there."

I sensed a presence in a thicket a small distance away. Seeing what I was doing, the person in question panicked and gave

themselves away. They were about to run, but it was too late.

“Hah!”

I jumped out the window and closed the distance in a single stride. I was about to give the entire thicket a good kick, but it startled instead.

“Wha—?!”

Reflecting the moonlight, a spear tip lunged from the foliage, sharp and quick. I wasn’t going to get hit so easily, of course. On the spur of the moment, I adjusted my kick to hit the spear, which forced its wielder out of the thicket.

I grimaced. I’d kicked with quite a bit of strength, even though I’d been holding back, but there was no real feedback. They’d jumped back to soften the blow. The figure rolled out of the thicket and instantly stood upright. They were a little short, but judging by their stature, they looked to be a man. I couldn’t tell for sure because of the hood covering his face. What’s more, he had a cloth clinging to his mouth. Judging by his appearance and movements, he was no simple villager. In any case, if he planned on fighting, all I had to do was respond in kind.

I drew my sword. I was in pretty bad shape from pushing myself in the afternoon, but I wasn’t going to be outdone. However, just before I charged in...

“Wait,” the hooded man said, holding a palm out to me. “I’m not your enemy. I’m just here to talk.”

“You look awfully suspicious to be saying that.”

“Please, calm down.”

The man’s voice was strangely deep, making it obvious he was putting on a fake voice. He evidently didn’t want to be identified and had apparently put a lot of effort into hiding who he was. If so...it was possible he was someone I knew.

I didn’t have anything to base this on; I just felt like I’d heard his voice before. If he were someone close to me, I would’ve figured it out right away. That meant I’d only met him in passing somewhere. Or maybe this was all just my imagination. Well, I’d find out for sure once I unmasked him.

“I can’t trust someone who refuses to show me their face,” I declared.

“I’ve got my own reasons.”

“Do you think that’s enough to convince me?”

“I have no ill intent. If you’d like, I’ll cast aside my weapon.” The hooded man let go of his spear before he finished speaking, then held up both his hands. “I just want to tell you something.”

“Mrgh...”

I was reluctant to attack a man who’d discarded his weapon. If

he'd done so knowing this, then he really was someone I knew. Using my moment of hesitation as a chance, the hooded man cut to the chase.

"It's fine if you don't wanna hear me out, but this has to do with your fellow visitor."

"My fellow visitor...?"

Those words also made me more reluctant to attack.

"That's right. If you're interested, then don't attack me."

This man was very suspicious, but he was being rational. He'd said he had his own reasons too. Most of all, I remembered my quarrel with Majima. Back then, things had gotten way out of hand because I'd refused to listen and instead attacked. It was important to be able to talk things out. I kept myself on guard but withdrew my sword.

"Thanks," the man said.

"I'll only hear you out. It doesn't mean I trust you," I told him flatly.

"That's enough."

The man didn't back down at all. He was the type that got on my nerves exceedingly.

"So? What do you want to tell me?" I asked.

"Before that, lemme confirm one thing. Do you know the fake savior's identity?"

I felt my brow rise. Despite saying he was here to tell me something, he had the nerve to ask a question first. Things weren't going to move forward if I argued about it, though.

"I do. Do you?" I asked.

"There is no fake savior. It's just a rumor that spread naturally. The Holy Order is using it to hide the failures of real saviors."

There had been no point in turning the question around on him, because he'd answered without pause. Who on earth could this be? He'd said a truth I'd only just discovered like it was perfectly obvious. Honestly speaking, he was extremely shady. I was sure my misgivings showed on my face, but the man paid that no mind.

"You know that much already, right?" he asked.

"Yes. What of it?"

"That makes things easy. Actually, one of your fellow visitors is in an awfully bad situation."

"A bad situation?" That didn't sound good. I couldn't let it pass. "And a fellow visitor?"

What followed was a name I didn't expect to hear.

"A man named Majima Takahiro. You know him?"

"Huh? Majima?" I blinked in confusion, and my mind caught up a beat later. "H-Hang on! What happened to him?!"

In that instant, I forgot all about the misgivings I had about the

man. I pitched forward and pressed him for answers. This was the first time he looked to be thrown off his game.

“A-Aah. It’s really bad, but...” I still couldn’t see his face, but shock rang in his voice now. “Huh? You’re intimate with Majima Takahiro?”

“I-I’m not intimate with that kinda guy!”

“I see...” The man sank into thought for a short moment, then immediately continued. “Whatever. More importantly, there’s something I have to tell you.”

Something about the way he put it bothered me, but he had a point.

“What happened to Majima?” I asked again.

“I’m sure you’ve heard of Margrave Maclaurin. He’s the biggest noble in the southern Empire. That same margrave has sent an army Majima Takahiro’s way, publicly touting that they’re going to subjugate the fake savior. That was about a month ago.”

“Wha...” I was speechless for a moment. “What the heck?! Majima’s a visitor! He’s not a fake!”

“Yeah. That’s right. But I’m sure you have an idea as to why this is happening.”

“Well...” I knew what he was getting at instantly and gulped. “The fake savior was actually real saviors. So, considering that, it’s possible for Majima to be mistaken as a fake savior...?”

“That’s the gist of it.”

“No way. In that case, he got caught in the cross fire of these fake savior incidents.”

I knew that Majima’s circumstances were easy to misunderstand. Even if the Holy Order was proactively using the fake savior rumors, those same rumors could still have a negative effect.

“I came here to tell you this,” the man said.

“I understand,” I replied, clenching my fist. “I need to do something!”

It had been the right decision to hear this man out. Majima was a hateful guy, but he was still a comrade who’d come to this world with me. I couldn’t abandon him—I absolutely refused to.

“The margrave is currently in his own territory. If you wish to stop the provincial army, you should talk directly to the man who gave the order. You’ll be able to make it with those legs of yours.”

With that, the man picked up his spear and vanished into the night. In the end, I didn’t find out his identity. I had no idea what he was plotting either. Nevertheless, the truth he passed to me still remained.

Even if it came from a bona fide third party, even if there was some kind of scheme behind this, it didn’t change what I had to do.

The only ones who could unravel this unfortunate misunderstanding were people who knew the truth. I was still in bad shape, but strength came back to my core.

The next day, first thing in the morning, I started running at full speed toward the Margraviate of Maclaurin.

Chapter 19: The Man of Justice

An old home trampled by monsters... Every time he remembered that scenery, Louis Bard asked himself one question: How much could he do for the sake of the people?

“Oh? Commander Louis, what is that?”

This happened while Louis was having a meeting to organize the camp. One of his subordinates casually asked about an accessory he was wearing.

“Aah, this?”

Louis smiled bitterly—the subordinate’s sight was sharp—then held up his wrist. He was wearing a leather bracelet. It was made of several leather straps woven together in a peculiar design. Normally, Louis didn’t wear any accessories. He enjoyed a high status in the Margraviate of Maclaurin, and he was also paid a significant wage, but he’d never shown any interest in personal luxuries. That was why his subordinate was interested in the accessory, even if it was simple.

“I had to mediate a little quarrel the other day,” Louis said.

“You mean when you saved that prairie dweller boy?”

“Yes, that. I was given this as thanks. It’s a prairie dweller charm, apparently.”

The incident had taken place in one of the towns they’d passed through during this expedition. Louis had protected a prairie dweller boy who was being mistreated, and he’d seen to it that the boy’s wounds were treated. When they parted, the boy learned that Louis was leading an army on an expedition and gave Louis the bracelet out of concern for his safety.

If it were just an ornamental accessory, Louis wouldn’t have accepted it, but it was filled with the boy’s concern. Louis wasn’t so tactless that he didn’t realize this. He’d gracefully accepted it and put it on right before the boy.

“That boy was extremely grateful, wasn’t he?” another subordinate said. He’d been with Louis at the time. He was praising Louis, but Louis looked a little depressed.

“I merely did what was natural,” Louis said, then sighed. “It is so wretched to oppress such a young child, and unjust and meaningless to persecute prairie dwellers. They are subjects of the Empire, just like us.”

He lamented this from the bottom of his heart. Imperial citizens

had a tendency to disparage the prairie dwellers. To the people who built up defensive walls around their towns to protect against monsters, the prairie dwellers, who lived outside the walls and went grazing in the dangerous prairies, were extremely abnormal. Louis understood their feelings, but he didn't think it was a reason to discriminate against them. The current Margrave Maclaurin, Glantri Maclaurin, had raised Louis in that manner.

Louis Bard was a native of a village that had been destroyed by monsters. The Maclaurin Provincial Army had saved him, given him shelter, and taken him back to the margrave's residence.

As some kind of charitable enterprise, several other children had been there who shared his circumstances. Glantri Maclaurin had given them jobs so that they could survive and offered them the opportunity to receive training. Among those children, Louis had had a good foundation and had put in the most effort. This had drawn the margrave's eyes.

Glantri Maclaurin had taught the still-young Louis that it was a noble's duty to guide and protect the people. There was no place for discrimination, and such a thing couldn't be allowed. One had to hold out their hand to all people, or true peace would never come.

For the sake of the world, they had to fight the evil that threatened the people and carry out justice. Unlike the great saviors, they didn't possess enough power, but even so, they had to do everything they possibly could. Glantri Maclaurin had taught him that as well.

To Louis, these were the teachings of his one and only benefactor. He would never doubt those words, and he would sacrifice himself for such ideals. Once he'd made up his mind to do so, reality was so vexing to him.

For example, take that middle-aged man who'd oppressed the prairie dweller boy the other day. He was an executive for a certain trading firm. Louis had spoken with him but had been unable to rid the man of his prejudice. It was so unfortunate.

The existence of a fake savior was even more preposterous than that. Why were fellow humans incapable of living hand in hand? Louis simply couldn't understand.

"Commander Louis!" As Louis let out a deep sigh, a soldier came running to him. "I have a report, sir!"

"What is it?"

Louis immediately focused his thoughts. He was the leader of an army; he couldn't just sit by grieving for this sad world. He figured they'd encountered some monsters or something, but that wasn't what the soldier was here to tell him.

"Just now, a request to meet you in person has come."

This was unexpected.

“A meeting? Tell me the details.”

“Yes, sir.”

The soldier nodded and went on to explain the situation. Listening to him, Louis narrowed his eyes.

Chapter 20: Sense of Values ~Iino Yuna's POV~

The day after the mystery man told me about the army heading Majima's way, I parted ways with Gordon, whom I'd been traveling with for nearly two months, and headed for the Margraviate of Maclaurin. It would be best to put a stop to this before the fighting started. Even if it had already begun, the sooner it could be stopped, the better. To that end, I forced my legs to keep running, even if it was reckless.

The margrave's residence was located in the mining city Nourias. Normally, the journey would take a month and a half, but I completed it in a week. It was an enormous city built at the foot of a mountain. At its center was an ancient fortress called Fort Nourias. Much like Serrata, this fort had once been on the front lines in the war against the Woodlands. In the present day, it was the largest city in the Empire, thriving off the mining of runestones from the nearby mountains.

In this world, it was common for all towns to have sturdy defensive walls. The multiple layers of defense that'd been built each time the city expanded were more imposing than any I'd seen before. Just looking at them made me feel oppressed. I passed through the heavy gate, which had probably seen armies come and go in times of emergencies, and entered Nourias.



I was granted an audience with the margrave right away. A big reason for this was the letter of introduction I'd gotten from Gordon, borrowing the name of the Holy Order. He'd handed it to me, figuring it was a necessity with the fake savior rumors running rampant.

Guided by a man who worked for the margrave, I headed for Fort Nourias. Unexpectedly, the exploration team had yet to arrive.

"I've heard the members of the exploration team are currently staying in a certain town close to Nourias," my guide said, kindly telling me what he knew. "I'm told they have been going from town to town, suppressing monsters all the while."

"Aah. That's why it's taken them longer to get here than planned." I'd heard news of the exploration team fighting monsters when I

entered the margraviate. They seemed to be steadily accumulating accolades. I was sure they made all the proper preparations and put together strategies for each operation. Our leader's assistant, Kuriyama, was impeccable at stuff like that, and our leader was also very levelheaded.

If only Kouzu and the others had given it a little more thought before taking action, things would never have ended up like that. The thought was unbearable.

"Is something the matter, madam?"

My thoughts must have shown in my expression, because my guide looked at me with curiosity.

"No, it's nothing. Anyways, this is a really big city. I haven't seen one this big since coming to this world."

I couldn't possibly tell him the hidden truth behind the fake savior incidents, so I brought up a random topic instead.

"Indeed, that only stands to reason," my guide said proudly. "All of this is a boon of His Lordship's power."

"Could you tell me more about the margrave?"

He happily complied with my request. The current Margrave Maclaurin, Glantri Maclaurin, was apparently an outstanding feudal lord who soundly managed the prosperous margraviate. One of his most prominent endeavors was the flood control of the Aralia River to the west. He also worked to eradicate monsters, and sometimes he commanded the provincial army to assist more impoverished noble territories.

He was a grand noble who contributed greatly to the stability of the southern Empire. That was his reputation within his own territory, and as I'd had several opportunities to speak with citizens in the region on my way here, I found pretty much all of them had the same favorable opinion of him.

"He's a good lord, huh?" I said.

"He certainly is. He is our pride and joy."

Even people like that could make mistakes, but I didn't voice that opinion. There was no point in mentioning it. Besides, I'd come here to correct that mistake. According to what I'd heard on my way, the margrave had, in fact, dispatched the army to subjugate the fake savior. Majima's name never came up, but this still authenticated the story I'd heard from the mystery man.

I continued following my guide and steeled myself for what was to come.



"Welcome. Come on in."

I met with Glantri Maclaurin in a reception room. He was an old

man with ambition. His perfectly straight hair was tied behind him, and he had a neatly trimmed beard. His back was as straight as could be, and vitality ran through his slender body down to his fingertips. The fancy shirt and trousers he wore upheld his name as a grand noble, but he wore no gaudy ornaments. His look was very refined.

“Please, have a seat,” he said in a deep voice.

I did as he offered and sat on the sofa. I started with an introduction, then apologized for the sudden visit. During that time, a servant brought us tea. Everything was in place for us to talk.

“Now then, to what do I owe the pleasure for today’s visit?” he said, turning his wrinkled face my way.

This was the do-or-die moment. I braced myself and cut straight to the point.

“Lord Maclaurin, I’ve come to speak with you about the army you dispatched to defeat the fake savior. I was told by a certain individual that you sent this army to subjugate Majima Takahiro.”

I wasn’t going to overlook the most trivial change in his expression. Was he a virtuous statesman like the rumors said? Or was he a villain who hid his motives? I had to be sure.

“Is this true?” I asked.

“The name Majima Takahiro shouldn’t be circulating in public. Well, I’ll refrain from delving into why you know this.” The margrave nodded solemnly. “Yes. It is just as you say. I’ve sent my army to Aker to subjugate the fake savior Majima Takahiro. It is an army of justice—the arrow to strike down evil.”

He had a calm demeanor, and I couldn’t sense any guilt in his expression or tone.

“You sent them all the way to Aker?” I asked, trying to provoke him.

“Miss Iino, as a member of a long line of nobles, I have a duty to protect this world’s peace,” he replied, unshaken. “The people’s livelihood is like a small ship constantly being shaken by waves. Aker is certainly far away, and it isn’t even part of the Empire, but so long as people live there, we cannot remain idle spectators to their plights.”

He was being sincere. I could sense an iron will behind his words, and they were backed by what had become the core of this man’s philosophy over the long years. I was relieved by this. At the same time, I also felt sorrow.

“All evil in this world must be destroyed. Isn’t that right?” he said.

“Yes... Such intentions are wonderful,” I replied, feeling like my chest was being crushed. “But Majima’s case is different.”

“How so?”

His puzzled look pained my heart. This person was right, but he was wrong. It was similar to the time I chased Majima, which was

why I couldn't allow the margrave to continue making this mistake.

"Majima Takahiro isn't a fake savior. He hasn't done anything wrong. He came here with us to this world. He's a visitor."

I spoke earnestly. Half of it was for Majima's sake, but the other half was out of consideration for the man before me.

"What...? How can that be?"

"I'm sure it's surprising, but it's true."

I bent forward and pleaded with him. The margrave wasn't a villain. On the contrary, he had a strong sense of responsibility and a love for others. His heart despised evil. To put it simply, I sympathized with him.

"That's why there's no need for conflict," I said. "There's no need for unnecessary sacrifices."

"I see... I understand what you're saying."

The margrave nodded. He was acting rationally. He wasn't the type to get angry about his actions being criticized. Another one of my worries vanished. I was relieved. At this rate, convincing him would be simple.

"Could you withdraw your troops?" I asked.

The margrave gave me a tranquil smile and, with his usual composed manner, said...

"That, I cannot do."

"Huh...?" I froze. I couldn't understand. "Wh-What...did you say...?"

"I said that I cannot withdraw my troops."

Even after asking again, his answer didn't change.

"Why?!" I half rose to my feet without meaning to. I couldn't understand why the battle couldn't be stopped. "Majima hasn't done anything wrong! So why?!"

"I've heard that Majima Takahiro is accompanied by monsters," the margrave said as if quietly reprimanding me. "Isn't that more than enough reason?"

"Huh?" I was dumbfounded. That wasn't a reason at all. What was he saying? "I-I don't understand."

"So you don't..."

He pinched his brow. It was as if he was irritated that he had to explain the obvious.

"Are you listening, Miss Iino? Monsters are an evil that threaten the people of the world. Being in the company of such beings is all it takes to be evil."

"Just because of that...?"

"Yes. There is no room for argument."

This was preposterous. An evil person was someone who did evil things. That was supposed to be the case, but the margrave thought

differently. In a sense, he was saying, "It doesn't matter whether any evil deeds were done." It was unreasonable, and it all sounded like an excuse to me.

And yet the margrave was unashamed. He was unshakable. His attitude was filled with goodwill and chivalrous spirit. It was almost nauseating. It was because I sensed this that I finally came to understand a dreadful truth.

"Evil must be purged. The army of justice has been dispatched for that purpose. They will definitely destroy the evil of this world."

The margrave wasn't a wicked man. He moved in accordance with what he thought was good and common sense. He valued justice, and he despised evil. He was no different from me in that regard. Be that as it may, his values were off. His definition of evil was wrong, fatally so, but there was no way of convincing him.

"B-But Majima really did come to this world with me."

I clung on to the last hope I had, to the fact that we were saviors here. That was one unwavering truth. I knew from personal experience how big a deal that was to the residents of this world, and in this case it was my final bastion.

"Will you still say that Majima is evil?"

"Of course," he answered with ease.

"Wh-Wha...?"

"Majima Takahiro certainly may be a visitor. Nevertheless, that has nothing to do with his being a savior."

The margrave's declaration was so forceful that it was baffling.

"Wh-Why? I mean, Majima..."

"It isn't all that complicated. There are many exceptions to the advent of the saviors this time around. Not only did over a hundred saviors visit Fort Ebenus, but they say over a thousand descended on our world at once. That in itself is a marvelous thing. Nonetheless, as this happened on a scale unheard of, there are obviously distortions."

"Distortions?"

"I have my status as a margrave. Because of my responsibility, I need to obtain all sorts of information. I get it from the fortresses on the front, from the nobles in every region, and from the Holy Order. That is why I found it unusual from the very beginning."

His eyes turned as sharp as blades.

"No shadow can exist in the saviors' reputation," he continued. "That is why it's strange. The secret plotting of the visitor who masterminded the attack on Fort Tilia, and the rampage of the Lord of Darkness who participated in it... Neither event should have been possible for those who are supposed to bring us our salvation."

"Ah..."

Terror ran down my spine. The truth behind the attack on Fort

Tilia was being kept secret, probably for the same reason that the fake savior rumors were under wraps. They couldn't afford to sully the saviors' prestige.

It was a different matter when it came to hiding it from Margrave Maclaurin himself, though. This was the man who'd taken in the soldiers of Fort Tilia. There was no way of hiding it from him. Nevertheless, he'd declared, "No shadow can exist in the saviors' reputation." In short...

"There are villains among the visitors. However, no saviors would do such a thing. Therefore, there is only one conclusion. All of this was perpetrated by fakes who slipped in among the saviors. It cannot be explained otherwise. Majima Takahiro, the man who wields the fiendish art of commanding monsters, is simply one among those."

"Ah... Uh..."

I understood now. Being a visitor wasn't enough to convince the margrave. My last foothold crumbled pitifully beneath me. I couldn't think of anything to say.

"Evil must be purged. From that standpoint, the fake savior escaping to Aker is rather convenient."

I spun my wheels, unable to do anything but listen to his words.

"At any rate, those lands are filled with unclean beings. We'll be able to purge them along with a great evil."

He spoke as if this was worth celebrating, and it gave me a horrible premonition.

"Unclean beings...? Purge them along with...?"

I felt the blood draining from my face. The old man I'd sympathized with up until now looked like an inexplicable being.

"Wh-What are you planning?" I asked.

The old man gave me a gentle and magnanimous smile...which only made him all the more dreadful.

Chapter 21: The Provincial Army's Rampage

“Commander Louis. We’ve arrived at our destination.”

Louis’s adjutant, who had the look of an excited soldier on the eve of a battle, called out to Louis while they rode on horseback.

“I see.”

Louis remained calm, his mannerisms befitting his status as the man in charge. Despite being a commoner, and an orphan at that, his constant effort had finally brought him to the very pinnacle at the head of an army. He looked down at the village walls before him, brought his horse to a stop, and gave out his orders.

“Tell the captain to prepare for an assault. We’ll go forward just as planned.”

“Yes, sir!”

The entire army moved in accordance with his will. The formation that had broken up during the march came back in order and took on a shape more suited to attacking.

The Maclaurin Provincial Army was made up of three branches: infantry, archers, and mages. All of the soldiers wore the same armor. The infantry were armed with spears and shields, and though their gear was heavy, their movements were brisk. The lines of shields and spears had no gaps in it, demonstrating their prodigious experience.

The archers were armed with bows and carried swords at their waists for close combat. They stood behind the shielded infantry. The infantry carried the burden of defending, while the archers formed the cornerstone for attacking. Morale was high, and they had more than enough arrows at the ready.

There weren’t many mages, so they were embedded in the other ranks. They were armed with swords and shields, and all of their equipment assisted in casting magic by suppressing the consumption of mana. At a glance, they looked rather plain, but upon closer inspection, one would notice the jewels decorating their equipment and see that they were the true pride of the Maclaurin Provincial Army.

Of the five thousand soldiers, only two hundred were mages, but all two hundred carried magic weapons. About the only other armed forces who were so well equipped were the Holy Order and the emperor’s personal Imperial Guard. This was due to the many

runestone mines in the margraviate and the vast wealth they provided. It wasn't just their equipment that was impressive, of course; the margraviate provided its soldiers with plenty of training, so every soldier was considerably skilled.

With such a large army marching through the Fringes, they'd encountered monsters on multiple occasions, but they hadn't suffered a single casualty. They were also accompanied by cavalry, who stood at the ready as a quick response force. It was a powerful army worthy of the grandest noble in the southern Empire. To any who opposed it, it was something straight out of a nightmare.

Before long, Louis's adjutant returned.

"All preparations are complete, sir. We can begin at any time."

"Excellent," Louis replied with a nod. "Our target is Kehdo, the village the fake savior Majima Takahiro is hiding in. We will launch an all-out assault."

A cheerful, steely glint shone in his eyes as he passed his next order.

"Annihilate them."

At Louis's command, the ranks of soldiers started advancing. This large army would trample anything and everything in its path.

Watching this orderly advance, someone let out a deep groan, his voice trembling with resentment.

"You bastard..."

Louis turned around. A man with his wrists bound together glared back at him. If the people of Aker were to see this, they would probably seethe with rage.

"Prince Philip. I see you've come to watch."

The soldiers had brought Aker's second prince, Philip Kendall. Indeed, just as Adolf had predicted, Philip had tried to stop the provincial army. In contrast to his easygoing demeanor, he was still a member of Aker's militaristic royal family. He protected others. He fought. Much like his fierce little sister who'd thrown herself onto the front lines to protect humanity, he had a strong heart, so when he heard news of the Maclaurin Provincial Army's transgression while on his journey to report to the king, he'd immediately decided to retrace his steps to Diospyro.

Majima Takahiro had saved Akerian citizens, and Philip had promised to provide his support. Thus, he had to live up to that promise and pay back the great debt he owed. He was sure he was doing it for his country's sake, and not just because Takahiro was a savior.

Philip greatly valued Takahiro's stance of doing everything necessary to protect what was dear to him. He sympathized with it, and he strongly believed that Takahiro couldn't be allowed to die over

some petty misunderstanding.

After returning to Diospyro, Philip had asked the Royal Army stationed there for details, then made haste for the Maclaurin Provincial Army advancing on Kehdo. It was impossible to stop their expedition without having a member of royalty like him around. That was what he'd thought.

He'd been granted an audience with the provincial army's commander, Louis Bard. Philip had claimed that Majima Takahiro was no fake savior. Even if he couldn't clear all their suspicions, Philip had pleaded that they at least put the attack on hold. He'd admonished them, saying it wasn't too late to wait for contact from the exploration team and confirm things with them.

His argument made a lot of sense, but the negotiation had failed completely. What's more, Philip hadn't even been given the time to plot a withdrawal before he was restrained on the spot. He bitterly regretted how careless he'd been.

How could he have predicted this situation, though? It wasn't just a matter of Louis being hardheaded and refusing to listen. Nothing had gotten through to him from the very beginning. To put it another way, Louis hadn't even attempted to have a proper conversation. Nonetheless, this didn't mean Philip's stance would change.

"Your Highness, I asked for your presence because I believe it is about time for you to come to your senses."

Louis was polite to the very end. Even though Philip was restrained, Louis showed a certain respect for him.

"I have no intention of harming you," he added.

He wasn't lying. The only reason Louis had restrained Philip was because there'd been a need for it. Even though their opinions differed, he couldn't disregard his opponent's dignity. They were both fellow humans, after all. Louis would act this way even when faced with a criminal. It was the core of his beliefs.

"If we do not join forces, humanity cannot continue to live in this harsh world. Even if our nations differ, we are fellow brethren. Brethren are meant to be loved, not hurt."

Louis was serious. Depending on the perspective, he had the same disposition as Philip. He was a protector. He was a fighter. To be more precise, Louis upheld the nature of House Maclaurin, which had a tremendous influence on his life. However, there was an enormous disconnect between Akerian royalty and House Maclaurin in this regard, which was why there was so much discord between them.

"I believe that, even if you've been entranced by evil, you will come to understand one day," Louis said.

"How can I understand?!" Philip snarled, his gentle features twisting with rage. "*Do you* understand what the hell you did?! What

the hell you're about to do?!"

"Of course. I will destroy evil and enact justice for the sake of the people," Louis declared without hesitation. "The wicked being who manipulates monsters must be burned to ash."

Louis's ideology perfectly aligned with Glantri Maclaurin's, hence his being here as the margrave's representative. In truth, Iino Yuna's hunch about Louis when she'd met him in Serrata was right on the mark. Louis Bard was, without a doubt, an incarnation of justice who existed solely for the sake of destroying evil. And his definition of evil wasn't restricted only to Majima Takahiro. That was exactly why he'd ordered annihilation.

"I'll kill every last thing in that village. Majima Takahiro, his servants...and even the village's elves. Yes. The elves are also evil beings who manipulate monsters they purport to be spirits. They are an abnormality that cannot exist in the world."

"You're inhuman..."

Philip was speechless. He knew that Louis wasn't all talk: he had already seen it for himself. Louis had attacked the neighboring village of Rapha—the reclamation village where Majima Takahiro had befriended the local elves.

It had happened just the other day. The majority of the villagers had escaped due to the village chief's decisiveness, but the few elves who'd remained had put up a resistance. The reclamation village had some amount of defenses in place in preparation for monster attacks, but they could do nothing against five thousand soldiers.

Pursuers had been dispatched to mercilessly hunt down the escaping villagers. At that rate, Philip's subjects would have been slaughtered. The only reason they had survived was because something had gotten in the way.

"That was an unfortunate turn of events yesterday. If not for that grotesque wolf, we would've annihilated them."

Right at the very last moment, a two-headed wolf with wriggling tentacles had cut off the pursuers as if to protect the last of the fleeing villagers. The force had only been expecting to mop up villagers, so they hadn't brought that many soldiers. They were preserving their strength for the true battle against Majima Takahiro, so the pursuers had given up the chase. Thanks to that, the villagers had managed to get all the way to Kehdo, where Majima Takahiro was staying. All the same, their life spans had only been extended a little. Philip understood this.

"Open your eyes, Louis Bard!" he screamed in a bloodcurdling voice. "Elves are citizens to be protected like any other!"

"No. They are evil. They are abnormalities that must be purged. You should be the one opening your eyes."

Louis refused to listen. It was like his speech about discrimination regarding the prairie dwellers was an utter lie, but to him, at least, there was no contradiction. Louis loved the people without a shadow of doubt, and he believed his one and only value as a survivor of his village was to protect the powerless masses and execute justice. Louis's subordinates idolized him for this.

Even when faced with someone of different opinions, even when facing a criminal, Louis never forgot to show respect. However, that only applied to his fellow "humans." The "people" he was meant to protect didn't include elves.

On the contrary, he was convinced that purging their existence from the world was a good deed made with good sense. These were the true colors of Elf-Hater Maclaurin. As someone whose stance was thoroughly aligned with House Maclaurin, Louis was almost like a pious believer—an analogy that wasn't far off the mark. Ever since the day he'd been saved from his ruined village, Louis Bard had revered Glantri Maclaurin. That faith was now backed by the highest powers in this world.

"Hey, ain't it about time?" a deep voice said, cutting into their conversation.

"Sir Edgar," Louis responded.

"What's the situation?" Edgar asked, stopping Louis from dismounting his horse.

Edgar had a rough way of speaking, but his tone was quiet. The wild impression he usually gave off, which anyone who spoke with him could feel, had faded. On the other hand, that only emphasized his gloominess. Like this, it was almost easier to talk with him when he was just pining for battle. In fact, Louis's adjutant actually froze. Louis himself was unaffected, though.

"Everything is going as planned, Sir Edgar."

His words were filled with respect, which was natural for Louis. Edgar was a member of the Fourth Company of the Holy Order. He'd not only fought Majima Takahiro, but had inherited the will of Travis Mortimer—who had regrettably fallen unconscious since the battle with Majima Takahiro—and was offering his aid to the provincial army.

Moreover, right before the provincial army went on the offensive, he'd successfully carried out a surprise attack at the risk of his own life. Majima Takahiro was surely unconscious now. This led to an inevitable deterioration in the enemy's morale and chaos among their chain of command. In addition, it was expected that Majima Takahiro's servants, including the former knight turned ghou, were less than half as strong as usual. In other words, Edgar's independent action had driven the enemy into a state where they couldn't even put

up a proper defense. That said, the wounds Edgar had suffered in the process meant he couldn't participate in the battle. Other survivors of the Fourth Company were participating in his stead.

"This is your fight from here. I'll provide support," Edgar said.

"I know, Sir Edgar. I won't put your contributions to waste. I'll exhaust my abilities to their fullest. For justice."

"Yeah. For justice."

Philip gritted his teeth. The Fourth Company's very existence had given the Maclaurin Provincial Army just cause for this preposterous expedition. Philip didn't believe that Edgar meant it when he said this was for justice. Edgar merely wanted vindication for losing to Majima Takahiro. Nevertheless, Edgar was a knight of the Holy Order—the very symbol of justice in this world. His mere presence meant that Aker's Royal Army couldn't move against the Maclaurin Provincial Army for this border transgression.

With no exaggeration, that was how significant the Holy Order was. Philip had promised Takahiro to prepare a place for a savior and the Holy Order to reconcile over a misunderstanding, not to make an enemy of the Holy Order. Making an enemy of them was like turning one's back on all forms of legality. Consequently, nobody could touch the provincial army so long as the Holy Order was supporting them. Nobody could stop them anymore.

Battle cries shook the air as the army pushed into the village.

"Aaah..."

Philip groaned in sorrow. The attack had already begun. An overwhelming and hopeless one-sided battle was taking place—if one could even call it a battle. They were simply trampling whatever was in their path.

"Sir, hostilities with monsters have begun!" a messenger from the front said. "Even though we have come under fierce attack, our forces are superior!"

Philip clenched his jaw, unable to endure listening to this report. He couldn't even plug his ears with his hands restrained like this. The army closing in on the village was like a giant beast—a righteous beast that devoured all evil. Its repulsive figure made Philip want to vomit.

"Reporting, sir!"

And then the report Philip really didn't want to hear finally came.

"An enemy monster has been defeated!"

In the next instant, cheers of celebration erupted all over.

"Yeah! Yeah! Splendidly done!"

"Purge all evil! Blessings upon the righteous!"

"Hail to the margrave!"

Philip was dumbfounded as he listened to their cheers of joy.

“A monster...a servant...killed? N-No way. Th-That can't be...”

When he'd visited Majima Takahiro, Philip had met and spoken with all of Majima's servants. He'd only been there for a short while, but he'd caught a glimpse of how much those girls cared for each other. It had shocked him, but he didn't harbor any ill feelings because he was sure that they were something entirely different from what his people called monsters.

And now one of those girls was dead. They'd been killed. Losing the pillar that supported them, they couldn't even bring half their strength to bear. They just couldn't fend off this enormous army. It was over. With what faint hope he had now lost, Philip fell to his knees. But just then...

“That's odd,” someone muttered.

“Is something the matter, Sir Edgar?” Louis asked.

Edgar maintained his gloomy expression and shot Louis a glance.

“It's weird,” he said. “It's too damn early for any victories.”

“Are you saying we were too rash and made a false report?”

Louis's adjutant said, his expression sullen. He probably felt indignant at what sounded like criticism.

“No, I'm not saying nothing like that. It's just...” Edgar fell eerily quiet, then one beat later, he asked, “You said a monster croaked. Which one?”

“Huh?”

“It's outta the question that the impregnable slime got done in first. So the fox? Or maybe the puppet? You're not gonna tell me you got the spider, right?”

Edgar glared at the adjutant.

“So?” he urged.

“I'll get confirmation!”

The adjutant ran off in a hurry. After a few exchanges with the messengers, he returned.

“So?” Edgar repeated.

“Sir! It appears a rabbit was defeated!”

“I see...”

For an instant, Edgar's gloomy expression split into a twisted smile—the expression of a ferocious carnivore. He looked cheerful.

“They got us good.”



A line of people with delicate features and pointy ears walked through the forest. These were the elves of the reclamation village. All of the surviving villagers were here. Those who couldn't move on their own due to wounds were riding in manamobiles and hand-pulled carts. All the elves looked grim, but not a single one had given up.

A girl walked at the end of the line. She wore a maid outfit and had gray hair. She wielded an enormous bardiche in her hand. Her cold features seemed even stiffer than usual, a show of her tension and determination.



Just then, her finely shaped brow twitched. She spotted a white spider approaching from behind. The distance between them closed quickly, and they were soon face-to-face.

“I’ve returned, Rose.”

“How did it go?”

“I did just as Katou instructed. Those fools fell for it completely.”

“Well done. Hopefully, this bought us some time.”

Rose nodded and looked into the distance—toward where the army of justice was supposed to be.

“I won’t let you do as you please.”

That was her declaration of war. It was her vow to protect what was dear to her to the very end. The do-or-die flight from a five-thousand-strong army had now begun.

Extra Story: The Drinking Party and a Simple Promise

This happened around the time our daily lives started calming down in Shiran and Kei's hometown of Kehdo.

"Oh? Takahiro, what's all this?" Shiran asked after coming back from work.

Her blue eye was fixated on several bottles set aside right by the living-room entrance. They hadn't been there when she'd left the house earlier today.

"Aah, Leah left them there," I said.

"She did?"

Since Kehdo had been nearly annihilated, residents of the neighboring Rapha had come by a little while ago. They were mainly helping with the reconstruction effort, and Leah, the wife of Rapha's chief, was the one directing them.

"Remember? We got a portion of the supplies the other day," I explained. "Leah brought over some ingredients for us. Some liquor was mixed in among them."

"Aah. So it's alcohol."

"Looks like they sent some luxury goods out of consideration for Philip's visit, so Leah had some of it sent our way too."

"Is that so?"

Shiran nodded in understanding and picked up one of the bottles. She swirled around the liquid inside, then turned my way.

"What will you do with this?" she asked.

"Huh? Well, I was thinking of handing them out to the villagers."

I was still a minor, so I obviously didn't have a drinking habit. Some among the villagers surely enjoyed a drink, so it was better to offer it to them. However, an unexpected objection arose.

"That won't do!" Gerbera exclaimed, suddenly bursting into the living room. She'd apparently heard our conversation.

"Huh? You drink alcohol?" I asked.

That was unexpected. Considering Gerbera's age, it wouldn't be all that strange if she had a taste for liquor, but she'd never given any hints of it before. I looked at her curiously, and Gerbera puffed out her bountiful chest with pride.

"No! I've never had any!"

"So you haven't."

“Actually, I have no idea what alcohol even is!”

“Not even at the starting line, huh?”

Well, alcohol was a human concoction. No matter how long a life she’d lived, it was natural for a monster to know nothing about it.

“So why do you want to keep it?” I asked.

“I remembered something after hearing the word ‘alcohol,’” she answered, giggling as she put her hand to her chest. “Kaneki once taught me something amusing regarding this stuff.”

“Mikihiko? I’ve already got a bad feeling about this.”

“Takahiro, you really do get rather merciless whenever Kaneki is involved,” Shiran commented.

That was just due to our long friendship. What’s more, I was convinced my premonition was right.

“So? I’ll at least hear you out. What did he say?”

“Hmmm. Would you believe it? It turns out that drinking this alcohol stuff lets you get all hee hee haw haw with the opposite sex!”

“Sorry... Can you repeat that?”

“Hee hee! Haw haw!”

So I hadn’t misheard her. Now that my bad premonition was proved right, my head hurt.

“I want to get all hee hee haw haw with you, My Lord! I want you to pamper me! And I want to pamper you!”

“I *do* get what you’re saying...”

The way she put it was a little nonsensical, but in short, she wanted to get a good mood going between us using alcohol. I sighed. I would’ve preferred it if she’d worded it better.

“So? What will you do, Takahiro?” Shiran asked with a giggle. She looked as if she was having fun. She probably already knew my answer.

“Well...if you want to have some, then I don’t have any reason to object.”

It was a request from my cute lover, so I wanted to grant it if possible. Besides, it made me happy to be desired...setting aside whether there would be any hee heeing or haw hawing going on.

Gerbera’s face burst into an expression of pure joy.



“Ooh! You’re so understanding, My Lord!”

“Whatever makes you happy. Oh, but is it legal for me to drink at my age in this country?” I asked, only realizing this halfway through our conversation.

Shiran nodded. “Not a problem. There were some among the saviors at Fort Tilia who drank as well.”

“So I guess it’s fine. Let’s go call Lily and the others too.”

“Very well. Leave that to me,” Gerbera said, nodding, then flew out of the living room.

“She’s really excited,” Shiran said with a strained smile. “When Gerbera is in such high spirits, it makes me a little anxious.”

“Don’t say it. I was thinking the same thing.”

Gerbera was the type to mess up somehow when she was so enthusiastic like that, but I hated to call it off for no real reason when she looked so delighted. Therefore, though somewhat anxious about how things were going to turn out, we prepared for our drinking party.



We opened the bottle of liquor after dinner was over, but not many people were drinking. We obviously couldn’t let the children like Lobivia, Kei, or Ayame have any. Rose was a puppet and couldn’t physically drink, whereas Shiran was undead and couldn’t get drunk. After the children went to bed, we handed out cups to those who could enjoy a drink.

“Hee hee. This is my first time having any kind of alcohol. I think I like it.”

Lily twirled her cup of liquor about as she juggled her body happily. We were relaxing at home, so her lower half was back to that of a slime. As for me, after having the slightly drunk Lily tug on my arm a bunch, I found myself seated on her slime half like a sofa before I even knew it.

Maybe the alcohol made her a little more assertive than usual. Her free arm was wrapped around mine, and she leaned coquettishly against me. Her slender body felt supple, as though she were missing parts inside her, and she was a little warmer than usual.

“Looks like you’ve got a taste for it, Lily,” I said.

“Yup. How ’bout you, Master?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t get it yet.”

I didn’t feel all that different from normal. I was a little hot, and I could feel blood rushing to my head, but that was about it.

“Well, I’ve been taking it slow like Shiran suggested, so maybe it’ll just take time,” I added.

I'd only had about a quarter of a cup so far. I didn't know my own tolerance for alcohol, so I abided by Shiran's advice to drink slowly.

Incidentally, during her time in the Alliance Knights, Shiran had had several opportunities to drink while socializing. Knights posted in the Woodlands frequently risked death, so many among them would de-stress by drinking. Shiran didn't dislike having a drink either.

I glanced at Shiran across the table and met her eye.

"Is something the matter?" she asked, cocking her head.

"Not really..."

"Aah, does my not drinking perhaps bother you?"

Shiran's cup didn't have liquor in it. She was participating only to have a good time.

"There's no need to concern yourself over it," she continued. "I won't drink, but I'm enjoying myself. Besides, I've had a pleasant feeling for a short while now somehow."

"Like getting drunk on the atmosphere?" I asked.

"Rather, it seems I'm being influenced by you, Takahiro."

"By me?"

"A large portion of my being depends on you, so I suppose that's why. Hee hee. Two people can get drunk for the price of one. That's quite the bargain."

Judging by her joking manner, she did seem a little merrier than usual. Her smile was even a little erotic. Her undead complexion remained as pale as always, but she really did appear to be feeling good.

"That's how it is, so please enjoy and don't worry about me. Unfortunately, though, some don't seem to be enjoying themselves."

Shiran smiled sadly and looked to the side, where a crestfallen white spider sulked in the corner of the room.

"Mrgh. To think it would end up like this..."

Gerbera had been the one to suggest we have a drink, and here she was full of disappointment. Not a single drop of liquor was left in the bottle she held. All of its contents had vanished into her stomach, but her practically transparent white skin didn't have the slightest tinge of red to it.

"I never thought I wouldn't be able to get drunk..."

Using mana to reinforce one's body could ward off the effects of alcohol, but it was still possible to get drunk if one wanted to. One simply had to get rid of that extra resistance granted by mana, but it didn't matter if the natural resistance was there to begin with. Gerbera had a large body and was made different from the rest of us.

The reason why it was working for Lily was because she was skillfully mimicking a human. In other words, she was using skill to get drunk. Maybe Gerbera could get intoxicated with an entire cask of

the stuff, but we hadn't been given that much.

"Maybe it'll work better with coffee instead of alcohol," Lily said, smiling in amusement at Gerbera's state. "They say spiders get drunk off caffeine."

"R-Really?!" Gerbera exclaimed. "Where can I get this 'coffee' you speak of?!"

"I wonder? Do they even have it in this world?"

"Mrrrrgh."

"Actually, it'll be pretty bad if we find any."

"Why?!"

"In your case, it'd be dangerous for your sense of reason to go out the window. What'll you do if you squeeze our master without holding back and he goes all crickety crack?"

"Hey, Lily? I'm sure you chose the cute sound effects out of consideration, but that's still scary."

Lily did have a point, though. It sounded entirely possible. I felt a sudden chill and took a drink. Maybe this was the reason I'd felt anxious before this all started. I was glad nothing in particular had happened. Really, really glad.

Right as that thought went through my mind, something happened. They said incidents tended to occur when one relaxed, so perhaps this was an example of that.

"Oh, I might've screwed up," Lily muttered.

Before I could understand what she meant...

"Maaajimaaa!"

A human figure sprouted out of the slime I was sitting on right next to me. Arms wrapped around my neck as I froze in shock. Lily was embracing my right arm, while my left hand held my cup, so I couldn't do anything.

"M-Mizushima?!"

"Hey, hey, Majima! You surprised? Did I get you? Ha ha! You know what? I can come out at the same time as Lilz now! Shocking, right?!"

Mizushima made her appearance in astoundingly high spirits. Her face, which was very similar to Lily's and covering my entire field of vision, was dyed bright red. She was piss drunk. But that was strange. She hadn't had a drop of liquor. This was the first time she'd even come out today. In that case...

"Don't tell me the alcohol Lily had passed around to you?"

"The plan to surprise Majima is a huuuuuge success! Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

Mizushima, full of energy, tightened her hold around my neck. I nearly spilled some of my drink from all the shaking. The moment I shifted my focus to my cup, something smooth pressed against my

cheek. It was hot and soft. Maybe because I was, in fact, a little drunk, I couldn't keep up with what was going on. I heard Lily say "Wow" in a carefree manner, followed by, "Jeez, Miho, that's very bold of you." What did she mean by bold? And what was this sensation?

"Ah ha ha ha! It's, like, all tingly! And that tickles!"

"M-Mizushima! Your clothes!"

The drunken Mizushima was cradling my head in her chest. The problem was that this was happening right after she'd formed her body, so naturally, she was stark naked. I felt blood rushing to my head for an entirely different reason from the alcohol now.

Mizushima's breasts were more modest than Lily's, but they had more than enough womanly softness to them—not that I ever imagined that I'd find out like this.

Lily stared in wonder with her hand to her mouth, then let out a sigh. "There was that time she mounted you in bed too. Miho ends up in this kinda situation pretty often, huh?"

"Is now really the time for that?!" I hollered.

For the time being, I had to do something about this. I drank what was left in my cup to free up my hand and got Lily to let go of my other arm. With both hands free, I managed to peel Mizushima off me.

"Aahn. Majima, you meanie..."

"Don't make weird noises. Come on, cover—"

"Aah! Mizushima-senpai! You can't!"

Just as I stood up to put some distance between us, a reproachful voice came from my side. I looked over, wondering what was going on, and saw Katou right there. I thought she'd help stop Mizushima for me, but something about Katou was strange. It was odd how tightly she was clinging to Rose, and her face was bright red.

"Don't tell me... You too?" I asked.

"Unfaaaair! I wanna...with Majima-senpai...too. Hm? Me too? Me...too? So I just hafta strip?"

Her articulation was off, and her behavior was suspect. She'd gotten rather drunk in the short time I hadn't been watching.

"Wh-What do we do, Master? Mana is even cuter than usual!" Rose exclaimed.

Rose was extremely flustered, which was rare for her. She was acting weird as well, but not because she was intoxicated. She just had no idea what to do about how much her usually calm best friend had changed.

Katou stood up from Rose's side and, in the next instant, staggered. She looked like she would fall over, so I supported her on the spur of the moment.

"Woow. Senpaiiii," she said, sounding awfully happy. "You're sooo close. Hee hee. Hee hee hee."

This was bad. She was totally smashed.

“Liquor sure is tasty, huh? I was just taking li'l sips, but I'm feeling soooo good now. I really like it.”

“So that's why...”

Katou's cup, which had apparently been refilled, was half-empty. Holding it preciously against her chest, she then tried to lift it up to her lips again.

“Hey, you've had enough.”

I stopped her in a panic, and Katou blinked in surprise. Her usually serene eyes were now in a drowsy haze.

“Huh? Okay. Got it,” she said, her smile askew. “You'll drink it then? Hee hee. Goooo ahead.”

“How did you come to that conclusion?”

“You're not gonna? Then I will.”

“Wait. No. Don't. Fine. I'll have it.”

“Yup, then 'eeeere you go.”

I took the cup from her. She was liable to start drinking from it again if I took my eyes off her, so I downed its contents in one gulp and set it down on the table. It was a lot stronger than whatever I was having. Her first cup had been diluted with water at Shiran's recommendation, but after getting drunk, Katou had probably forgotten to dilute the second cup.

The thought of an indirect kiss briefly passed through my mind, but I didn't have the time to worry about that. Katou was still staggering. If I stopped supporting her, she would likely collapse. As for the drunkard in question, she was using her now-free hand to touch my chest.

“Senpaiiii, your chest is sooo firm. Tee hee. I touched it. You're so nice and buuurly. I like it burly. Hee hee. Tee hee hee. Like, Senpai. Looove.”

I knew she was talking about muscles, but her saying it like that straight to my face made my heart thump just a little. Her passionate eyes were bad for my composure.

“I touched yours, soooo wanna touch mine back?” she asked.

“No,” I replied quickly.

“It's fine if it's you. How unnnnnfortunate. Guess I'll strip.”

“You're not making any sense!”

Katou didn't hesitate at all and grabbed her shirt. I quickly held her hand down before she could finish taking it off. That was close. I ended up seeing everything from her belly button up to her underwear.



“What’re you doin’?” she asked, giving me a cute look of protest. “I can’t strip like this?”

“You’re a shockingly terrible drunk, you know?”

“It’s more like everything she normally suppresses is pouring out thanks to the alcohol,” Lily muttered, not that I had any time to pay attention to her.

“Rose, lend me a hand.”

Fortunately, when Rose hugged her firmly from behind, Katou calmed down. As for Mizushima, Lily pushed her back down into her slime half, forcing her back to “her room.” It was a surreal spectacle.

“We managed, somehow or other...”

I plopped back into my seat. With all the panicking and moving around, I felt my body getting hotter. I was a little dizzy. I sighed, then noticed a tearful gaze pointed my way.

“Gerbera?”

“E-Everyone is getting all hee hee haw haw with you! I wanted to do that!” she yelled, trembling and looking mortified. “I want to flirt too!”

Mizushima and Katou being drunk had been a headache-inducing turmoil for me, but it was evidently something Gerbera envied. She drew closer with teary eyes.

“You don’t need to cry about it,” I said.

“But, My Lord...”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it.”

I gave her head a good pat, and Gerbera sniffled. She was so cute and lovable. Dizzily so, in fact. Gerbera had said she wanted to flirt—a cute request from my lover.

Well, guess I’ve got no choice. I put my hand to Gerbera’s cheek and pulled her face to mine. I then pressed my lips against hers.

“Huh? Master?”

I heard Lily’s dumbfounded voice. I wondered why she’d reacted like that, but I quickly decided I didn’t want to bother thinking about it and concluded that it was fine.

Gerbera froze. She still couldn’t suppress her strength, so when it came to doing things like lovers, she needed to restrain herself with her own threads. Apparently, that wasn’t necessary today.

As such, it was fine to keep going. It was perfectly fine. I was sure it was. It definitely was. I kept my lips against hers and reached for her beautiful chest just as usual. I pushed up her weighty breast, its attractive shape changing between my fingers. That sensation was so comforting, and my fingers began moving all on their own, but then Gerbera suddenly leaped back.

“M-M-M-M-My Lord?! Wh-Wha?!”

“What’s wrong, Gerbera? Isn’t this what you wanted?”

“It is! But I didn’t think you would actually do it! Hm? Now that I think of it, there’s no need to refuse?”

“Gerbera! Time and place! Think of the time and place!” Lily yelled. “I can’t have you losing control and getting caught up in the flow too!”

Lily was completely panicking. It was rare to see her like this when it came to these things. She was usually composed. Today was just full of rare sights.

“Master, you’re totally drunk. I know you’re not used to it, but you were pacing yourself. How did this happen?”

Lily grimaced, then came to a sudden realization.

“Aaah! You didn’t pace yourself at all! You chugged like crazy when Miho teased you! And you had Katou’s drink too!”

“What’re you saying, Lily? That was nothing. I’m not drunk.”

I had, in fact, knocked back a couple extra drinks due to the series of emergencies, but I wasn’t drunk. I calmly assessed my own state and concluded I only felt a little good. Also, my head was spinning, and sitting here doing nothing made me wobble unsteadily, but that was it. It was nothing.

“Yup. I’m absolutely not drunk.”

“That’s what all drunks say!”

“No. Takahiro isn’t drunk,” Shiran said in protest, swaying up from her seat.

“Shiran?! This isn’t the time for jokes!” Lily exclaimed.

“By the way, Takahiro. I’d also like to flirt. Should I strip?”

“How can you say that while acting all serious?! Oh, right, you’re drunk because he is!”

Lily stopped Shiran from stripping. Gerbera writhed about with her arms over her breasts. Rose looked thrilled as she hugged the bright-red Katou from behind. I looked at all of them and smiled.

And so the noisy night went on.

Having stopped Shiran from stripping, Lily complained that she was tired, looking at me to pamper her. With my head still in the clouds, I nodded and cuddled her in my arms, when in an unusual turn, Shiran joined in. She held out her head to me, and I petted her. Watching this and still holding down her pounding chest, Gerbera screamed, “I got a late start!” Meanwhile, Katou, delighted at being in Rose’s arms, hummed a tune.



The next day, I woke up in bed muttering to myself.

“I really went and did it now...”

I’d gotten quite drunk last night, but my memories appeared to be

perfectly intact. Honestly, I would've preferred to forget, but life wasn't that convenient. The only saving grace was that I hadn't done anything weird except for that one thing with Gerbera. I just flirted a little bit. Well, not a little. A lot. Like, a *whole* lot. I totally screwed up.

"Are you awake, Master?" Rose said. She'd come to wake me up. "Good morning. Can you get out of bed? If you're still tired, nobody will mind if you continue resting."

"I'm fine. I'll get up."

"Okay, then."

I got out of bed. The alcohol's influence was pretty much gone, but because of that, I couldn't look Rose in the eyes.

"I brought you water. Would you like some?" she asked.

"Yeah, thanks."

I was always groggy in the mornings, even if I hadn't been drinking. After gulping down some water, my mind became more clear. I looked up at Rose, who was standing by my bedside with perfect posture.

"How's everyone else?" I asked.

"Mana is pale with a hangover, so she's curled up in bed. Shiran doesn't need sleep, so once the alcohol was out of her system, she returned to work. Lily is currently taking care of Miho."

"What about cleaning up?"

"There's no need for concern. I finished cleaning already. Also, forgive me, but I prepared breakfast this morning, so please don't expect much. Kei helped out, so it should be all right."

"I see."

Rose had handled pretty much everything.

"Sorry, Rose," I said, scratching my head.

"What for?"

"Now that I think of it, you were the only one who didn't get to enjoy a drink last night. And yet..."

"Aah. That?" Rose nodded in understanding. "It was my first experience spending time like that in the land we've settled down in. It was quite the commotion, but everyone had fun. I wouldn't exchange it for anything in the world."

"Rose..."

"Time spent like that is of great benefit. It reminded me what it is I want to protect. I'll never forget it, no matter what happens in the future. We have a reason to continue struggling, after all."

Our position in this world was unstable, and nobody knew what the future had in store. However, no matter what happened, we would hold fast to the very end. The foundation of that vow was right here for us to experience.

Rose looked so beautiful as she said that. I found myself totally

charmed by her.

“If there is another opportunity to do so, let’s have a party like that again,” she said with a brilliant smile.

“Yeah. You’re right. We’ll have another one, one day.”

We spoke of the future. It was a simple promise, but it would definitely grant us the strength to stand against the perils we were sure to face in the not-too-distant future.

Monster Tamer

11

Author
Minto Figure
Illustrator
Napo





"Berta, do
you intend
on leaking
information
about our
king to
him?"

DORA
NIGHTMARE STALKER

KUDO RIKU
1ST YEAR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

BERTA
SCYLLA















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by Minto Higure

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